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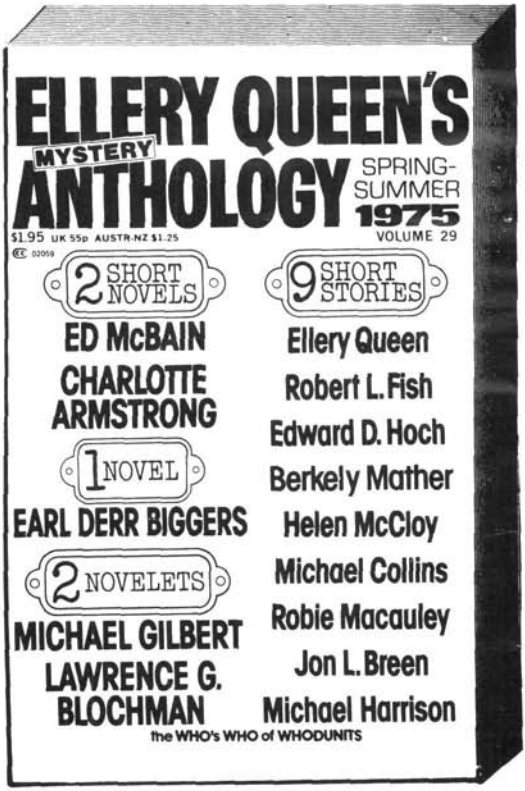

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The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN'S
Mystery Magazine

THE ENCHANTED TOOTH	Edward D. Hoch	4
THE LITTLE THINGS	Isaac Asimov	17
THE BENTEEN MILLIONS	Francis M. Nevins, Jr.	20
LIVE AND LET LIVE, CHICK!	S. S. Rafferty	38
RAFFLES AND THE BRIDGE OF SIGHS	Barry Perowne	50
MR. STRANG AND THE CAT LADY	William Brittain	68
A MATTER OF PHYSICS	Alfred Kuan	81
THE KNIFE SALESMAN	Isak Romun	84
THE TOMATO MAN'S DAUGHTER	Joyce Harrington	92
CASSANDRA'S CASTLE	J. F. Peirce	112
LAUGHTER BEFORE DYING	Nedra Tyre	127
THE COULMAN HANDICAP	Michael Gilbert	142
THE JURY BOX	John Dickson Carr	110

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a *NEW* Lollipop Cop story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Paul Tower, the Lollipop Cop, was assigned to grade schools to give talks and try to reach youngsters "with a new image of the cop on the beat." At School Number 23 he met another person trying to reach the young minds—"the most popular attraction on the elementary circuit," the Tooth Lady and her Enchanted Tooth that could be anything the pupils wanted it to be—"a rocket ship to far-off places, a jewel worth a king's ransom" —anything! . . .

THE ENCHANTED TOOTH

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Paul Tower, the Lollipop Cop, arrived early at School Number 23. It was an older building, in an older section of the city, and its smoke-stained brick exterior reminded him of the school he'd attended two decades earlier. He wasn't due to speak to the lower grades till just before lunchtime, but he always liked to say a few words to the principal first. It gave Tower a better idea of any special problems the school might have, and judging by experience he knew that a school like Number 23 had a lot of them.

"Problems?" Principal David Cray repeated. "Well, Officer, do you call two eleven-year-olds high on drugs a problem? Or a twelve-year-old girl who carries a knife and knows how to use it?"

Paul Tower nodded. "You've got problems."

Cray was deceptively youthful in appearance, with blond hair worn just a bit longer than Paul's. Though he might have been 40, he could have passed for much younger. "No more so than most schools these days," he said. "Problems come with the job."

"You seem to be well integrated."

"Oh, sure. There aren't any

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racial problems—the black and white kids even smoke pot together."

"You mean drugs are your big problem?"

Cray nodded. "You can buy just about anything in this school, and it's getting worse. Maybe your talking to the young ones will help things. To the older ones you'd just be one more pig."

"I'm used to that," Paul said with a smile. "And that's the reason for the whole Lollipop Cop program. We're trying to reach the young ones with a new image of the cop on the beat."

David Cray glanced at his watch. "Well, you'll get your chance. The lower grades are assembling in the auditorium now, and you're on right after the Tooth Lady."

"Tooth Lady?"

"Mrs. Seagle. Don't tell me you haven't run into her before this! She's the most popular attraction on the elementary circuit."

Paul Tower chuckled. "Maybe I should catch her act."

Mrs. Seagle was a large woman of indeterminate middle age. She stood on a lighted stage at one end of the assembly hall, feet apart like a drill sergeant, and held up a large white tooth of polished wood, twelve inches high and six inches wide.

"This is my enchanted tooth, children," Mrs. Seagle began, in a rasping voice that reminded Paul of some teachers from his own childhood. They were the ones the kids always made fun of, the ones better suited to perfume counters in department stores than to classrooms full of youngsters.

"Do you know why it's enchanted? Because it can be anything you want it to be! A rocket ship to carry you to far-off places, a jewel worth a king's ransom, or even a key to knowledge! But it can be none of these things unless you *treat it with care!* Can you imagine a pretty girl with teeth missing from her smile? Or a man trying to work with a toothache? If any of you have ever had a toothache you know how *painful* it can be! And here's what causes the pain, and sometimes the loss of the tooth."

She opened the hinged tooth to show a painted cross section of its structure. "Once decay eats through the enamel and into the dentine and pulp, you have a serious problem. When it reaches these blood vessels and nerves . . ."

Paul turned to David Cray at his side. "She's scaring them half to death," he whispered.

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The principal shrugged and said nothing.

"This is the way we brush," Mrs. Seagle went on, producing a giant toothbrush for her giant tooth. Paul could take no more. He retreated out the side door for a breath of fresh air.

It was a mild April day with more than a hint of spring. The remnant of a dirty snowbank in one corner of the parking lot was the only evidence of the particularly long winter the city had suffered through. In another day the snowbank would be completely gone.

"You're the Lollipop Cop, aren't you?" a voice asked at his elbow. He turned and saw a young man in green work pants and a T-shirt.

"That's me," Paul admitted.

"I'm Bill Bringer, the custodian here. You probably don't remember it, but you arrested me once."

"I haven't been on regular patrol in more than a year," Paul said, studying the man more closely. They were probably about the same age, close to 30, and the muscles of Bringer's arms indicated he was no stranger to hard work.

"That's when it was—a year ago. I was drivin' a stolen car on Charles Street when you nabbed me."

"What happened to you?"

He gave a lopsided grin. "They got this new law if they don't bring you to trial in six months they gotta drop the charges. That's what happened to me. The D.A.'s office got busy and I got lucky."

"And they hired you at the school?"

Bringer shrugged. "I never been convicted of anything. Why not?" He lowered his voice a bit. "Actually, one of the guys on the Parents' Association got me the job. He owed me a favor."

"Glad to see you're doing something better than stealing cars."

"I'm off that kick. Waitin' for some big money to come along. Hey, you talkin' to the kids today?"

Paul nodded. "As soon as the Tooth Lady finishes."

Bringer chuckled. "That old bat! I think there was one just like her when I was in school. The last time she came, I was carryin' her case in—you know, with her tooth an' brush in it—and I dropped it. She near took my head off! She remembered too. Today she wouldn't let me near it."

David Cray stuck his head out the doorway. "We're ready for you," he told Paul.

"Good." He grinned and followed the principal back inside.

The kids were always an ap-

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preciative audience, and when he'd finished his talk and passed out the lollipops several of them crowded around for a better look at his equipment. They were wide-eyed when he took out his unloaded gun and handcuffs, and properly spellbound when he allowed the handcuffs to be passed around.

The custodian was busy folding chairs, and at the far end of the hall he could see Mrs. Seagle deep in conversation with one of the teachers—a tall young woman with blonde hair who could have been a fashion model. Paul decided it would do no harm to meet her. When the children were led away he started in that direction, but Cray intercepted him.

"Do you have a minute before you leave?"

"Sure," Paul replied.

"I just want you to meet Jim Weston. Jim's the new president of our Parents' Association."

Weston had a powerful handshake and a brisk manner. His presence at the school during the daytime hinted that he was in business for himself, free to come and go, and his first words confirmed it. "Weston Insurance Agency. We're just down the block from Police Headquarters."

"Sure," Paul acknowledged. "I've seen your sign."

"What brought Jim here this morning is the matter I discussed with you earlier—the drug situation here at Number 23."

Before he could say more, they were interrupted by Mrs. Seagle. "I must talk to Officer Tower before I leave," she announced. "You know, passing out all those lollipops isn't good for the children's teeth. Too many sweets cause decay."

"I hadn't thought about that," Paul admitted, not knowing what else to say.

Satisfied that she'd made her point, she turned to pick up her suitcase. "Where's my tooth?"

Jim Weston turned, not fully understanding her words but catching the note of panic in them. "What did you say?"

"The tooth I use for my class demonstrations—I had it in a cloth bag, right on top of my suitcase!"

"Could it be inside?" Paul asked.

She snapped open the suitcase, but only the oversized toothbrush was in there. The tooth had disappeared. "It's been stolen," she said. "Someone took it."

"I'm sure you must be mistaken," David Cray said, trying to soothe her.

"I'm not mistaken! It was here and now it's not."

"Who'd want to steal it?" Cray asked.

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"One of the children probably," Paul suggested. "All that talk of rocket ships and enchantment might have made it seem quite attractive to them. What did the bag look like?"

"Black velveteen, with a drawstring. It fitted inside my case here."

"I'll go talk to the kids. You look around here meanwhile. It might turn up."

The blonde teacher was just shepherding her flock back into their main-floor classroom when Paul overtook them. "Pardon me, Miss. Could I have a word with your pupils?"

She gave him a warm smile. "I'm Sally Fowles. We enjoyed your talk, Officer."

"Thanks."

"Now how can I help?"

"I just want a word with them." He raised his voice a bit. "Boys and girls, there may have been a crime committed, right here in your school. Mrs. Seagle's display tooth is missing—you know, the one she just showed you. She needs that tooth to show other boys and girls. Did any of you see what happened to it?"

The children looked blank. Paul put them at ease with a joke and then waved goodbye to Sally Fowles. At the next two classrooms it was the same story: none of the children had seen the tooth after Mrs. Seagle's demonstration.

He went down to the hall and found Cray and Weston still with Mrs. Seagle. "We've been all over this place," the principal told Paul. "No tooth."

"Imagine," Mrs. Seagle sniffed, "a policeman in the room and somebody steals it!"

"I'm sure it'll turn up," Paul tried to reassure her.

"I'll have to order a new one. You don't just walk into a store and buy them, you know."

"I'm sure not."

He watched her leave the auditorium and walk across the parking lot to her car. Someone certainly had taken the tooth, but Paul was damned if he knew why.

Paul drove over to Angie Dean's apartment that night when he got off duty. Angie was a pretty nurse he'd met when he first started on the kiddie circuit. They liked each other, and being with Angie helped him forget about the automobile accident that had killed his wife and child.

"Hi!" she greeted him at the door. "Any crime today?"

"You wouldn't believe it if I told you."

"Try me."

Over cocktails he told her about the missing tooth. "They have a bad drug problem at the school, and I suppose some kid

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maybe thought he could sell it. Addicts will steal just about anything. Anyway, it's not my problem. Let's talk about you. What sort of day was it?"

"The usual. A few skinned knees and an upper-grade girl fainted. School nursing doesn't offer many surprises."

"Are we going out for dinner or eating in?"

"It's sort of late. Will you settle for last night's leftovers?"

Before he could reply the phone rang. He was closest and picked it up. "Hello?"

"I thought you might be there, Tower." He recognized Lieutenant Gavin's voice immediately. "We need you."

"For what, sir?"

"There's been a killing."

"I'm not—"

"At School 23, where you spoke today. We want you to come right over."

"Who—?"

"Someone killed the custodian—fellow named Bill Bringer."

Paul drew a deep breath. "I'll be over, sir."

He arrived at the school fifteen minutes later, parking in the lot between the Lieutenant's car and the truck from the technical unit. Most of the men in the school were known to him, and he nodded to a few as he entered. "This way," Gavin said, leading him down a short flight of concrete steps to the school's heating plant.

Bill Bringer's body was sprawled near the large gas furnace. He was still dressed in his green pants and T-shirt, and there was very little blood. "What killed him?"

"Knife wound. Went in under the ribs, probably right to the heart. A thin blade, so there wasn't much external bleeding."

"Who found him?"

"One of the parents. Fellow named Weston who was here for a meeting."

Paul nodded. "I met him this morning."

"Did you see the dead man around too?"

"I talked to him a bit, out in the parking lot. He reminded me I'd arrested him once, on a stolen-car charge."

"Weston said something about a robbery. A large tooth used for demonstration purposes?"

"That's right," Paul confirmed. "But I don't see any connection with the killing." He filled in the Lieutenant on the morning's events.

Gavin grunted. "Maybe this Bringer saw who took it and got himself killed."

"Do you kill anyone over a stolen piece of wood? It must have been taken by some kid."

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"That's likely, I suppose. But then who killed him? And why?"

"The principal mentioned a girl who carried a knife to class. There may have been others as well. Bringer might have caught some kids down here and got himself killed for it."

Gavin watched while the body was removed, then turned to Paul and said, "I want you to help out on this one, Tower. You can talk to people—the children especially—and find out who was in the habit of carrying a knife to school."

"All right, sir."

Gavin smiled. "Do a good job and one of these days you'll make detective. Get you out of that uniform."

"You know, sir, I'm beginning to like being the Lollipop Cop. I don't know that I'd want a promotion. Not just yet, anyway."

The Lieutenant grinned and was about to comment when David Cray came down the steps. "I'm the principal here. Someone phoned me there'd been a killing."

While Gavin gave the details, Paul went in search of Jim Weston. He found the president of the Parents' Association in the assembly hall, dictating a statement to one of the detectives. He glanced up, recognized Paul, and said, "You were here this morning."

"That's right. Go on with your statement. Don't let me interrupt."

"There isn't much to tell. I drove into the parking lot around seven thirty, a bit early for the Parents' Association meeting at eight. Bringer was supposed to set up folding chairs for our meeting, but he hadn't done it. I saw the door to the furnace room standing open and I went down to look for him. I found him like that. Dead."

"Did you see any kids around? Or any adults?"

Weston thought carefully before replying. "It was getting dark, but there were three or four older boys playing basketball up at the end of the parking lot. I didn't notice anyone else."

Paul nodded. "I'll go check."

It was dark outside now, and the area of asphalt beneath the basketball hoop was deserted. He stared into the night, searching in all directions, and heard at last the sound of boyish laughter from the next street. Walking in the direction of the sound, he found three youths of twelve or thirteen seated on the curb smoking cigarettes. They tried hiding them as they saw him approach.

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"I'll take that," he said, holding out his hand for the nearest cigarette.

"Hell," the kid said, handing it over, "it's not grass."

Paul sniffed the butt. The familiar sweetish odor of marijuana was missing. He checked the other cigarettes, but they were all well-known brands. "Why'd you try to hide 'em, then?" he asked.

"My old man don't like me smokin'. He send you to find me?"

"No," Paul answered. "But it's time you kids were getting on home. Were you the ones playing basketball in the school lot earlier?"

One of them nodded. "We took off when the police cars came. What's up, huh?"

Paul remembered his own boyhood, when the arrival of police cars would bring kids running toward them instead of away from them. "Did you see anyone enter the school building?"

Two of them shook their heads, but the third one said, "I saw a guy go in." Paul described Weston and the youth nodded. "Yeah, that was him. But he's always around at night. Him and that teacher."

"Which teacher?"

"Miss Fowles."

"Was she here tonight?"

"We didn't see her, but she mighta parked in the faculty lot on the other side of the school."

"What about Bill Bringer, the super? You kids see him?"

They all nodded. "He was playin' basketball with us for a while."

"Anything else?"

"Like what?"

Paul took a wild guess. "Was he selling you drugs?"

"No, man! We don't touch the stuff!"

"How about your older brothers? I'll bet they touch it."

The boys glanced at one another, but no one was ready to admit it, or to implicate Bringer. It had been a shot in the dark, and it hadn't paid off. He sent them on their way and went back to the school.

Lieutenant Gavin came up the steps from the furnace room. "We're about finished down there. Searched it, but didn't find a thing."

Paul was still trying. "Any drugs on the body?"

The detective shrugged. "Nothing visible. We'll check out some tobacco traces in his pocket, but it won't tell us much, even if it's marijuana. Hell, even the teachers probably smoke it these days."

"Bringer had a prior arrest record, as I told you. He looked the sort who could be pushing drugs to the kids. Hard stuff."

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"Looks can fool you sometimes."

"One of the parents might have killed him over it."

"The jury would probably give him a medal," Gavin said.

Paul went back out to his car. He wondered if Angie was still waiting dinner for him.

In the morning he located Mrs. Seagle in the dental hygiene office. She glanced up as he entered the tiny glass-walled cubicle. "You're the Lollipop Cop, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Find out who took my tooth yet?"

"No, I'm here about another matter." She hadn't invited him to sit down but he did anyway, removing some file folders from a straight-backed wooden chair in the corner. "You may have read about the murder at School 23 last night."

"That custodian? Yes, I read about it. Do you think whoever killed him stole my tooth?"

"I don't know," Paul admitted. "Did you know Bringer?"

She shook her head. "Never laid eyes on him. He looked young, from the picture in the paper."

"He was. About thirty."

"Could one of the children have killed him? So many of them carry knives these days."

"It's a possibility."

"Look," she said, smiling at him for the first time. "Will you attach a note to my requisition for a new tooth? Just something to verify it was stolen. Otherwise they'll deduct the cost from my pay."

He suddenly felt a tinge of pity for this aging woman who traveled from school to school, brushing her giant tooth with a giant toothbrush. He wondered if there was a Mr. Seagle and decided there probably wasn't.

He wrote a few words on a piece of notepaper and signed it before he left. That seemed to satisfy her.

Driving back to the school, Paul realized he hadn't learned anything from the woman except that the wooden tooth was still missing. And that bothered him. It probably was linked to the killing, but he couldn't see how.

David Cray wasn't in his office, and as Paul wandered the school corridors he spotted Sally Fowles, the blonde teacher. "Hello again. I was looking for the principal."

She gave him a friendly smile. "Mr. Cray is at a school board meeting. They're discussing whether to post guards in the buildings."

"Because of last night?"

She nodded. "Mr. Cray thinks Bill Bringer might have sur-

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prised a thief or vandal."

"In the furnace room? That hardly seems a likely place." He had another thought. "Have there been any unusual thefts from the classrooms lately? Something that might indicate a kleptomaniac?"

"No, not that I'm aware of. You always have children stealing pencils from one another—things like that—but there's been nothing unusual."

He remembered something else he wanted to ask her. "Is there some place we could talk privately?"

"The teachers' lounge. The music teacher's in with my class right now, so I'm on a break."

As he followed her down the hall a small voice called out, "Hey, gimme a lollipop!"

He smiled down at the boy and reached into his uniform pocket for the spares he always carried. "Here you are, son. But don't eat it in class."

The teachers' lounge was a small room with two tables and a few chairs. There was an electric coffee pot plugged in to one of the room's outlets and a faint odor of stale cigarette smoke in the air. "They don't like us to smoke in front of the children," she explained. "But now some of the nonsmoking faculty don't want us to smoke in here either."

Paul glanced down at a morning newspaper spread out on one of the tables. News of Bringer's killing had come in too late to rate full treatment, but there was a boxed item at the top of the page on the left side. Beneath a fuzzy photo of the dead man was a brief item to the effect that his body had been found in the school's furnace room by an unidentified parent. Death was attributed merely to "a chest wound," with no speculation as to the cause of it.

"It's terrible thinking one of the children could have done it," Sally Fowles said.

"Got any other suspects?"

"No," she admitted quietly.

"What about Jim Weston?"

"What? Jim? Why . . .?" His question had taken her off guard.

"Well, he found the body. He certainly has to be considered as a suspect."

"But certainly he wouldn't kill anybody!"

"Do you know him well?"

"Just around the school. He's active with the parents' group."

"Some boys told me you two were often around the school together in the evening."

"Only for meetings," she answered, a bit unconvincingly.

"Since he's president of the Parents' Association, I assume he's married. And the kids call

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you Miss, so I assume you're unmarried."

"Yes." She was clearly disturbed now. "What are you getting at?"

"Do you want to tell me about it, or must I ask him?"

"Ask him what?"

"Bill Bringer was waiting to score with some big money. Maybe blackmail was his method."

She had a grim smile on her lips. "Nobody pays blackmail for such things any more, Officer Tower. You're a couple of generations out of date. Yes, Jim and I love each other. And yes, his wife knows all about it. They're getting a divorce soon."

"I see."

"Does that satisfy you?"

"For now," he said.

Paul found Jim Weston at his insurance office downtown. The brisk young man gave him a powerful handshake and motioned toward a chair. He didn't seem surprised at Paul's arrival, and his first words after the greeting were, "She phoned me. Said you'd probably be along."

"She was right," Paul said. "Want to talk about it?"

"There's nothing in it that concerns the killing."

"Did Bill Bringer know about the affair?"

The question seemed to surprise Weston. "Why do you ask that?"

"I was talking to Bringer before he was killed. I wondered how a man with a record had gotten the job at School 23, and he said a member of the Parents' Association owed him a favor. I'll bet that was you."

"What if it was?" Weston bristled. "Anything wrong with that?"

"Was he blackmailing you?"

"Certainly not! He had a temporary job at the school, and I simply arranged for him to be hired on a permanent basis."

"After he caught you two together."

Weston's face was a mask, but after a few moments of silence the muscles began to relax. "All right," he admitted. "Sure, it was something like that. My wife didn't know about it then, and Bringer kept his mouth shut. I appreciated that. But he never tried to blackmail me!"

"And you didn't kill him?"

"I certainly did not kill him!"

"You only went looking for him to set up the chairs?"

"That's right. For our meeting. They were up during the day while you were there. Don't know why the hell he even took 'em down."

The chairs.

Bill Bringer had been folding

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chairs after the program in the auditorium. Folding chairs and putting them away, even though they had to be up again by evening.

Paul got to his feet. "I think you've been a big help," he said, and then left abruptly.

It was nearly the end of the school day by the time he returned to Number 23, and he had to push through a group of children to reach the entrance to the assembly hall.

Once there he paused to look around. The chairs had to be stored somewhere. Beneath the stage was the most likely place, and he pulled out one of the wide wooden drawers. Chairs were folded neatly inside. He opened a second drawer, and a third. In the last drawer he found it, pushed to the back behind the chairs.

Then he went to a phone to call Mrs. Seagle and tell her the stolen tooth had been found.

Most of the children were gone for the day by the time she arrived, out of breath from excitement. "You've really found it? Where?"

"This way," he said, leading her to the auditorium.

"Who stole it? Did you arrest him?"

"Bill Bringer stole it, but he's beyond arresting now."

"Bringer! The man who was killed?"

"Yes. You see, I remembered him folding chairs when they were supposed to be left up for a meeting last night. He might have simply forgotten about the meeting, but there was another possibility—that he used the chairs as an excuse to get close enough to steal your wooden tooth. If this was the case, I asked myself where he'd hide it. Not in the furnace room, because the police searched it. He couldn't have burned it, because a gas furnace doesn't have a large door like the old coal furnaces."

"So where is it?" she asked impatiently.

"He couldn't risk being seen carrying it away. He simply picked it up, hid it behind the folded chairs, and carried it over to these drawers beneath the stage. It was as good a hiding place as any, so he left it there." Paul pulled open the drawer and held up the velveteen bag. "Behold, the Enchanted Tooth!"

Her smile broadened. "How can I ever thank you, Officer?"

"Well, you could confess to killing Bill Bringer. Because I know you did it, Mrs. Seagle."

Her face went white at his words. She backed away a step, uncertainly, and said, "You must be fooling."

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"I'm not fooling, Mrs. Seagle. Once I knew that Bringer stole the tooth it became the most likely motive for his murder. And if he was killed because of the tooth, it meant someone wanted it badly—either you or a third party. But would someone else kill him for it without knowing where it was?"

"But I didn't know where it was either!"

"No, but your motive would be different. You would kill not so much for the tooth itself as for the knowledge of the tooth. Bringer wasn't above a bit of blackmail now and then. I think he stole it to blackmail you. By killing him you removed the threat, even if you didn't immediately recover the tooth."

"You don't have any evidence of that."

"Yes, I do," he said, hefting the black bag. "You made two slips, really. You said you'd never laid eyes on Bringer, but he told me earlier that you wouldn't let him carry your suitcase in because he'd dropped it once."

"He was mistaken," she answered grimly.

"So were you, Mrs. Seagle. You told me at your office this morning that Bringer might have been killed by a student because some of them carry knives to class. But the newspaper account didn't mention a stabbing—it only said he died of a chest wound. How did you know he was stabbed and not shot?"

Her hand moved then, almost faster than his eye could follow. He never saw if the knife came from her sleeve or purse, but he knew the way Bringer had felt in the split-second before his death.

"Damn you!" she screamed, and then they were on her and Gavin was knocking the knife out of her hand and snapping on the handcuffs.

"Good thing you called us," he told Paul after they had her under control. "She's fast with that thing."

"I was holding the tooth in front of my chest, just in case."

"What about the tooth? Show me."

Paul carefully removed it from the velveteen bag and held it up as Mrs. Seagle had done. "The enchanted tooth—it can fly you to the moon!"

He pulled the two roots apart as if they were chicken legs, and the wooden tooth opened vertically. A half-dozen packets of white powder fell to the floor. "Bringer must have heard about it from the kids and decided to blackmail her. Besides getting ourselves a murderer, Lieutenant, I think we've just got ourselves a drug pusher."

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a *NEW* short-short by

ISAAC ASIMOV

"It's the little things, really. I can stand the heat. It's the dripping I can't stand. Don't you hear it?" . . .

THE LITTLE THINGS

by ISAAC ASIMOV

Mrs. Clara Bernstein was somewhat past 50 and the temperature outside was somewhat past 90. The air-conditioning was working, but though it removed the fact of heat it didn't remove the *idea* of heat.

Mrs. Hester Gold, who was visiting the 21st floor from her own place in 4-C, said, "It's cooler down on my floor." She was over 50, too, and had blonde hair that didn't remove a single year from her age.

Clara said, "It's the little things, really. I can stand the heat. It's the dripping I can't stand. Don't you hear it?"

"No," said Hester, "but I know what you mean. My boy, Joe, has a button off his blazer. Seventy-two dollars, and without the button it's nothing. A fancy brass button on the sleeve and he doesn't have it to sew back on."

"So what's the problem? Take one off the other sleeve also."

"Not the same. The blazer just won't look good. If a button is loose, don't wait, get it sewed. Twenty-two years old and he still doesn't understand. He goes off, he doesn't tell me when he'll be back—"

Clara said impatiently. "Listen. How can you say you don't hear the dripping? Come with me to the bathroom. If I tell you it's dripping, it's dripping."

Hester followed and assumed an attitude of listening. In the silence it could be heard —drip—drip—drip—

Clara said, "Like water torture. You hear it all night. Three nights now."

Hester adjusted her large faintly tinted glasses, as though that would make her hear better, and cocked her head. She said, "Probably the shower

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dripping upstairs, in 22-G. It's Mrs. Maclaren's place. I know her. Listen, she's a good-hearted person. Knock on her door and tell her. She won't bite your head off."

Clara said, "I'm not afraid of her. I banged on her door five times already. No one answers. I phoned her. No one answers."

"So she's away," said Hester. "It's summertime. People go away."

"And if she's away for the whole summer, do I have to listen to the dripping a whole summer?"

"Tell the super."

"That idiot. He doesn't have the key to her special lock and he won't break in for a drip. Besides, she's not away. I know her automobile and it's downstairs in the garage right now."

Hester said uneasily. "She could go away in someone else's car."

Clara sniffed. "That I'm sure of. *Mrs.* Maclaren."

Hester frowned, "So she's divorced. It's not so terrible. And she's still maybe thirty—thirty-five—and she dresses fancy. Also not so terrible."

"If you want my opinion, Hester," said Clara, "what she's doing up there I wouldn't like to say. I hear things."

"What do you hear?"

"Footsteps. Sounds. Listen, she's right above and I know where her bedroom is."

Hester said tartly, "Don't be so old-fashioned. What she does is her business."

"All right. But she uses the bathroom a lot, so why does she leave it dripping? I wish she *would* answer the door. I'll bet anything she's got a décor in her apartment like a French I-don't-know-what."

"You're wrong if you want to know. You're plain wrong. She's got regular furniture and lots of houseplants."

"And how do you know that?"

Hester looked uncomfortable. "I water the plants when she's not home. She's a single woman. She goes on trips, so I help her out."

"Oh? Then you would *know* if she was out of town. Did she tell you she'd be out of town?"

"No, she didn't."

Clara leaned back and folded her arms. "And you have the keys to her place then?"

Hester said, "Yes, but I can't just go in."

"Why not? She could be away. So you have to water her plants."

"She didn't tell me to."

Clara said, "For all you know she's sick in bed and can't answer the door."

"She'd have to be pretty sick not to use the phone when it's right near the bed."

"Maybe she had a heart at-

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tack. Listen, maybe she's dead and that's why she doesn't shut off the drip."

"She's a young woman. She wouldn't have a heart attack."

"You can't be sure. With the life she lives—maybe a boy friend killed her. We've *got* to go in."

"That's breaking and entering," said Hester.

"With a *key*? If she's away you can't leave the plants to die. You water them and I'll shut off the drip. What harm? —And if she's dead, do you want her to lay there till who knows when?"

"She's not dead," said Hester, but she went downstairs to the fourth floor for Mrs. Maclaren's keys.

"No one in the hall," whispered Clara. "Anyone could break in anywhere anytime."

"Sh," whispered Hester. "What if she's inside and says 'Who's there'?"

"So say you came to water the plants and I'll ask her to shut off the drip."

The key to one lock and then the key to the other turned smoothly and with only the tiniest click at the end. Hester took a deep breath and opened the door a crack. She knocked.

"There's no answer," whispered Clara impatiently. She pushed the door wide open. "The air conditioner isn't even on. It's legitimate. You want to water the plants."

The door closed behind them. Clara said. "It smells stuffy, in here. Feels like a damp oven."

They walked softly down the corridor. Empty utility room on the right, empty bathroom—

Clara looked in. "No drip. It's in the master bedroom."

At the end of the corridor there was the living room on the left, with its plants.

"They need water," said Clara. "I'll go into the master bath—"

She opened the bedroom door and stopped. No motion. No sound. Her mouth opened wide.

Hester was at her side. The smell was stifling. "What—"

"Oh, my God," said Clara, but without breath to scream.

The bed coverings were in total disarray. Mrs. Maclaren's head lolled off the bed, her long brown hair brushing the floor, her neck bruised, one arm dangling on the floor, hand open, palm up.

"The police," said Clara. "We've got to call the police."

Hester, gasping, moved forward.

"You musn't touch anything," said Clara.

The glint of brass in the open hand—

Hester had found her son's missing button.

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a *NEW* Loren Mensing story by

FRANCIS M. NEVINS, Jr.

Loren Mensing, professor of law at City University, part-time deputy legal adviser to the police department, and anytime all-time criminal investigator and detective, takes a vacation in the Bahamas, all expenses paid, to protect the interests of a young woman who is one of the potential heirs to the Benteen estate. In mixing pleasure with business Loren found Lantana Island full of small surprises, and the business end of his trip full of big ones . . .

THE BENTEEN MILLIONS

by FRANCIS M. NEVINS, Jr.

In the orchid-scented Bahamian morning Loren slowed his rented Toyota to read the stone signpost at the interesection. Nottage Way. That was the one he wanted. Gingerly he maneuvered the car across the right-hand lane and turned right. The road climbed, then dipped gently into a little valley, bright with springy uniola grass. Half a mile ahead he made out the house, set back from the road, standing alone, tall palms in the front yard swaying in the warm breeze. A car was parked in front of the house, facing in Loren's direction.

Suddenly a figure erupted from the house, raced to the car, and gunned the motor. The auto sped up the gentle slope toward Loren's Toyota. Then the other driver seemed to catch sight of Loren and spun the wheels of his car in a frantic U-turn. The car roared south in the left-hand lane, past the house again.

Loren watched it recede into the distance. At the far end of Nottage Way he saw the little dot make a sharp right without slowing and merge into the arterial road traffic.

Why had the other driver not wanted to be seen? Loren was

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suddenly afraid he knew why. He pushed the gas pedal to the floorboard, jammed on the emergency brake when he reached the house, and ran to the front door. It was unlocked. Careful to touch nothing, he edged inside.

A large airy front room opened off a foyer. The woven blue rug that covered the entire floor was spotless except for the patch of blood. A man lay on his side in the middle of the room, the ebony handle of a long knife protruding from his back. His eyes were open and empty. A minute's examination and Loren knew the man was dead.

Another minute of thought and he knew who had killed him.

Nine days before, on the last day of the law school's summer session, Loren had been in his cluttered office above the law library, entering his students' seminar grades on registrar forms and trying to decide what to do in the three weeks before the fall semester began. Then the door opened, and when he saw who his visitor was he had a premonition that the decision had just been made for him.

"Hi, Loren, how did I do?" Gael Irwin breezed into the office and perched on the edge of his desk as unselfconsciously as a bird lighting on a tree branch. Loren noticed through the open door that another young woman, someone he didn't know, was standing in the hallway as though hesitant to come in.

"B Plus." He handed Gael the paper on sex discrimination she had written for his civil-rights seminar. "Very good analysis, but I'm not sure the world is ready yet for your solutions."

"I'll give it till the day I pass the bar to get ready." Gael shook her mop of tangled curls in half-comic determination. "But really, Loren, I dropped in for another reason. I've brought somebody who needs a lawyer. She finished college here last year and got her teacher certification but there's so much inflation and so many budget cuts that no one's hiring new teachers and so she's waiting tables at one of the student hangouts. Come on in, San—he looks vicious but he won't bite!"

The other girl edged into the doorway. She was tall and slender, in her middle twenties, with shy doe eyes and silky blonde hair falling to the small of her back. Gael introduced her as Sandra Bryan and then discreetly left. Loren scooped up the mass of papers on the visitor's chair so that she could sit down.

"Now what can I do for you,

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Miss Bryan?" he began.

"Take a vacation in the Bahamas with me," she said. "All expenses paid."

Loren blinked, wondering what he'd done to deserve such a favor. She responded to his puzzled look by reaching into her canvas tote bag and pulling out an envelope from which she extracted a letter. But instead of handing the letter to him she held both papers in her lap and smoothed the folds of the letter with fingers that seemed to move independently of her will.

"I should explain better than that," she said. "You see, I'm a distant cousin of the Benteen family. You know, Benteen Chemical?"

"A very distant cousin, I hope," Loren commented. He knew quite a bit about Benteen Chemical. It was the corporation that had had the major contract to supply the military with napalm and defoliants for Vietnam. He would have qualms about vacationing on "blood money."

"G. W. Benteen organized the company about fifty years ago," the girl went on. "He had two children—G.W., Junior and the business. The business did well, especially when there was a war. G.W., Junior and his wife died in a plane crash. They left a little boy, Jared Benteen. He was the last of the line and old G.W. must have spent an absolute fortune giving the boy everything as he grew up—exclusive private schools, summer trips around the world, foreign sports cars as soon as he could drive.

"Then G.W. and his lawyers arranged the estate so that when G.W. died everything would go into a trust fund with grandson Jared to get all the income as long as he lived. When Jared dies, or if he should renounce the estate, the property gets divided up among all the surviving descendants of old G.W.'s parents. That takes in a lot of distant cousins, and I'm one of them. Everyone's share depends on how they're related to the Benteen part of the family, and if you're an only child of parents and grandparents who were also only children, your share is larger than if you come from a big family."

"How much do you get?" Loren asked.

"Twelve and one-half percent. There's another distant relative, Rudolph Vaughn, who gets fifteen, and someone named Herman Harker gets twelve and a half like me. We three are the top takers. Great, isn't it? Only we don't take anything till after Jared dies, and he's only a few years older than I am."

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There was an undertone of bitterness in her voice, and Loren reflected that if he were Jared Benteen he'd be just the least bit concerned that this girl might take steps to accelerate her remainder interest and get out from behind her waitress apron forever.

"Old Mr. Benteen died of a coronary in 1965," Sandra Bryan went on, "and Jared began getting his income from the trust. In the fall of 1970 he entered Harvard Law School. I understand he did well on his first semester exams. Halfway through the spring semester he just—just vanished. Dropped out of sight like he'd dematerialized or something. And, Professor Mensing, no one has seen or heard a word from him since."

Loren thought he now saw the shape of the problem. "Who is the trustee of the G. W. Benteen estate?" he asked her.

"Carteret National." One of the largest banks in the country, Loren knew, on a par with Chase Manhattan in size and prestige.

"And how did Carteret National react to Jared's disappearance?"

"What *could* they do? They let the income from the trust pile up and hoped they'd hear from him eventually." Her glance dropped to the folded paper in her lap.

"And now they have?" Loren finished the tale tentatively for her and reached out for the letter and envelope. The envelope was postmarked from Lantana Island, Commonwealth of the Bahamas, and bore Bahamian stamps but no return address. The letter was a model of enigmatic brevity.

Dear Sandra Bryan:

We haven't met but I would like to know you.

I am thinking of renouncing my income from Grandfather's trust. If I do, one of the largest shares of the trust property will revert to you.

Before I decide, I want you to come to Lantana Island for a few days during the week of August 15. By a separate letter I am directing Carteret National to advance you $2,000 for your expenses out of the accumulated income they owe me. Please come.

The letter was signed *Jared Benteen* in a flowing piratical hand.

"This is an interesting piece of paper," Loren commented. "Except for your name in the heading there's not a single word in the letter that relates exclusively to you. It looks like one of the letters the law school sends out to alumni asking for

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donations. And I have the firm conviction that identical letters went to the others with large shares, Vaughn and Harker. Have you ever met those gentlemen?"

"No," she said. "I guess I'll get to meet them next week. But my parents are dead, I have no family, and I don't know anything about law or business so I don't want to go down there alone. I don't trust lawyers—they'll lie and cover up anything, but Gael says you're different. Will you go to the Bahamas with me and be my adviser? If Jared renounces his income I'll be able to pay you later."

"What will you do with the money if he renounces?"

She gave a rueful little laugh. "That's funny. What would I do with one-eighth of two million dollars? Pay the medical bills my mother ran up before she died, pay back all my student loans, buy some decent clothes and a car that runs. I might even have a few thousand left over for inflation to eat up." She looked into his eyes, more confident now. "Will you help me?"

That evening Loren rummaged through bureau drawers to see if he had any tropical sports shirts.

In the morning he visited the city's branch of the Carteret National Bank. An explanation to a friendly vice-president earned him the privilege of calling the main office in New York City on the WATS line that interconnected all Carteret branches. He was switched from one extension to another within the mammoth institution, then put on hold, then rerouted once again. By the time he was speaking to the head of the main branch's trust department his ear was aching from the pressure of the phone.

"Mr. Burke, my name is Mensing. I'm an attorney and a professor of law at City University. I take it you're familiar with the reappearance of Jared Benteen, the missing beneficiary of the G. W. Benteen trust?"

"Yes, sir, I'm acquainted with the matter," Jefferson Burke replied noncommittally in a deep Southern accent.

"And I understand you've received a letter from Mr. Benteen directing you to advance funds to certain people for a conference on Lantana Island in the Bahamas?"

There was a hesitation of several seconds before Burke answered tonelessly. "That is correct, sir."

"I represent Sandra Bryan, one of the ultimate remaindermen under the trust. Remain-

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derpeople," he corrected himself, remembering Gael Irwin's tirades about the male chauvinist bias in hundreds of legal terms. "She has asked me to accompany her as her legal adviser. Tell me, are you going to honor Mr. Benteen's letter and pay expenses?"

"We seem to have no choice," Burke said, "although may I say the circumstances are, ah, discomfortingly unusual. To protect ourselves we turned Mr. Benteen's letter over to an examiner of questioned documents. His report states that the signature appears to be genuine. If Miss Bryan sends us written authorization we'll forward the expense money." After getting the document examiner to verify her signature too, Loren guessed. The banker's mellifluous Kentucky voice oozed caution.

"Was this the first communication you've had from Jared since he disappeared?" Loren asked.

"The first anyone has had from him, to the best of my knowledge. Frankly, may I say we were more or less assuming he was dead. We've been accumulating the trust income, and after deducting the usual expenses there is about $400,000 presently at hand. If Mr. Benteen had remained missing for seven years we would have gone to court for a declaration of legal death and an order that the trust property be divided among the, ah, remainderpeople."

An intriguing hypothetical situation darted into Loren's mind. Suppose after seven years the bank obtained a judicial decree that Jared was legally dead, and a year later he turned up alive and found the estate distributed among the other takers?

Jefferson Burke's voice broke into Loren's thoughts. "We are sending one of our own people to the Bahamas. Mr. Mark Tate, the trust officer in charge of the Benteen account. Outstanding career, assistant manager of the trust department of our London branch until transferred to the home office two years ago, shrewd banking mind . . ."

Burke rambled on, making Loren extremely happy that it was not his money that was paying for this call.

The twin-engine cabin plane leveled off at 7000 feet. Sandra Bryan in the window seat beside Loren craned her neck to look down at the Atlantic sparkling in the fierce sunlight. A brief glance through the small plane's window was enough for Loren. He wasn't used to flying this close to the

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ocean, and the view gave him a twinge of uneasiness.

A syrupy voice flowed through the intercom system. "Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Flight 951, Miami Beach to Lantana Island, where we'll be deplaning in approximately twenty-two minutes. As you may know, Lantana is a part of the newly independent Commonwealth of the Bahamas, which consists of more than seven hundred islands. In 1492 Columbus made his landfall on the island of San Salvador which is about three hundred miles southeast of Grand Bahama Island and was inhabited by the Arawak and Lucaya Indians . . ."

Loren settled back in his aisle seat and closed his eyes as if that would somehow shut off the canned travelogue. Suddenly he felt a tap on his shoulder, and it was not coming from the gentle fingers of his client. He blinked at the salt-and-pepper-haired man in the double-knit suit who had the aisle seat across from him.

"Excuse me," the other asked, "but which Benteen relative are you?" Dark glasses accentuated his sunlamp tan and made his expression inscrutable. "I mean you're the only other man on the plane in a business suit so I gather you're one of them. But you don't match any of the descriptions in my file." He seemed miffed by the discrepancy between his file and reality. "I'm Mark Tate. Carteret National Bank."

Loren offered his hand. "Loren Mensing. I teach law for a living but right now I'm representing the young lady on my left at this little gathering of the clan."

The three of them chatted amiably for the rest of the short hop to the island. As a rule Loren didn't care for bankers, but Mark Tate was a special case. Above and beyond his virtues as catalogued over the WATS line by Jefferson Burke, he was willing to share with Loren the information in his files.

". . . and we've never picked up the slightest clue as to why he disappeared," Tate finished as the plane dipped for its approach to Lantana Airfield and the seatbelt sign flashed on.

Loren tightened the harness around his middle. "Well, considering that he was a young man in school and that Vietnam was still a hot war, mightn't he have disappeared to avoid the draft?"

The banker shook his head gravely, disagreeing and disapproving at the same time. "I was still with our London branch when it happened, but

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that was the first thing my predecessor thought of. Jared had high blood pressure and a 4-F draft classification. By the way, Professor, where are you and Miss Bryan staying on Lantana? We should keep in touch."

"The Royal Palm," Loren said. The wheels of the plane hit the ground and its brakes roared.

"Fanciest hotel on the island," Sandra Bryan shouted above the din. "Nothing's too good for us plutocrats, right?"

"Well, I guess that makes us neighbors for the duration. I'm also registered there." Tate chanced a split-second's grin. "And since the others are getting their expenses paid too, I wouldn't be surprised if that's where we all wound up."

They went through Bahamian customs inspection and shared a roomy taxi to the Royal Palm Inn, which like the less expensive resort hotels on the island was lightly populated in this off-season month. A few questions at the registration desk established that Mr. Rudolph Vaughn and Mr. and Mrs. Herman Harker had checked in the previous day. Loren left messages in the others' boxes arranging for an early evening meeting.

Vaughn was a tall CPA from Philadelphia, a bachelor in his mid-thirties with sandy mod-length hair, a Guards mustache, thick round eyeglasses that gave him the look of an owl, and an artificial right foot thanks to a car that had run over his real one during his high-school days. Herman Harker—short, squat, balding, and beetlebrowed—looked like a truck driver, said he owned three hardware stores in Denver, took pride in the fact that until this trip he'd never set foot outside the good old U.S. of A., and seemed completely under the thumb of his wife. Maxine Harker's size matched her voice and her frizzy hair went well with her short temper; she seemed eternally suspicious that people were trying to do her out of something that was rightfully hers.

The six of them met for two hours in the Royal Palm's Xanadu Lounge and accomplished nothing. No one had the least idea what was going to happen next, so they decided to hang loose and enjoy their vacation until Jared Benteen appeared.

Loren spent the next two days exploring the island with Sandy Bryan, savoring the unfrenetic Bahamian lifestyle. At each bus stop they found a line of Japanese-built vans waiting, the drivers chatting desultorily

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and running gay-colored spiky combs through their Afros until the seats of each minibus were filled with natives and a few pale tourists; then the buses would head for the International Bazaar or the golf course or downtown or wherever else each driver thought it might be pleasant to go.

Loren and Sandy spent a morning at the island's Nature Centre, tramping arm in arm through the unpolluted loveliness of a Bahamian forest along avenues of thatched palm, slender Caribbean pine, wild coffee plants, and lavishly blooming orchids. Curly-tailed lizards darted playfully across their paths, never quite getting squashed underfoot, and pink flamingos minced majestically through the jewel-like ponds.

They bought each other overpriced curios at the bazaar, drank warm beer in the John Bull Pub, swam in the languorous ocean and dined and danced and argued about the causes of inflation.

They rented a Toyota from the car rental agency next door to the hotel and drove around the island; Loren's lack of experience with the keep-to-the-left road rules imported to the Bahamas from Britain led to several close calls with native vehicles, and on the return trip Sandy, taking over, proved no more adept behind the wheel.

In the entire two days there was no sign of Jared Benteen. Loren began to wonder if once again he had vanished.

On the third evening after dinner they all met again in the Xanadu Lounge. Lamps disguised as native torches gleamed on the walls, and a troupe of Goombay dancers gyrated on the stage to the rhythm of a goatskin drum.

"Oh, God, look at how I'm peeling!" Maxine Harker moaned. "I went out by the pool two days ago to get some sun and I fell asleep and just look at me! Herm, why didn't you wake me up?"

Her bare arms looked raw and scaly, and flakes of dead-white skin lay around her chair. Hapless Herman, overdressed and squirming, rubbed the sheen from his forehead with a handkerchief.

"And what have you been up to, Mr. Vaughn?" Loren made a valiant effort to change the subject.

"I've been to the casinos," Rudolph Vaughn reported in the solemn tones proper to an executive board meeting. "Testing whether accounting principles could be applied to roulette. I'm $70 ahead so far." He beamed over the tops of his round glasses.

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"Speaking of accounting principles," Loren remarked, "it seems incredibly unbusinesslike of Jared Benteen to stay in the shadows and let us fritter away his money without getting in touch."

"Maybe he's watching us from those shadows," Sandy Bryan suggested. Her green evening gown seemed to glow in the subdued light.

Her words prompted Loren to scan the lounge. He saw only a dimly lit room with vacationers at scattered tables sipping rum drinks and clapping in time with the native dancers. They sat in small groups, keeping up a low hum of conversation; the singles seemed to prefer the long mahogany bar looking out on the dark sea. But the table directly behind Loren's was occupied by one man and Loren's eyes were drawn to the lonely figure.

And then, as if under the compulsion of Loren's scrutiny, the man tossed off his drink, stood up, and crossed over to the Benteen relatives' table. He stood almost at attention before them, but there was a mocking light in his eyes which seemed to put him in command of the situation.

"May I introduce myself?" he said, bowing slightly. "Jared Benteen, at your service."

He was tall and blade-thin, immaculate in a white dinner jacket, and he moved with the lithe grace of a cat. He seemed to be enjoying the others' surprise. He snared a vacant chair with his foot, set it in place at the table and dropped into it.

"Let's see some identification if you're Benteen," Rudolph Vaughn said, glancing at the others.

"Of course I haven't used that name for several years," the man replied easily. "Currently I am Vincent Callew." He reached into the breast pocket of his dinner jacket for a leather billfold that bulged with papers. "But I saved enough documentation from the old life so that I think you'll be convinced. The bulkier items are in the house I rent. And I'll be glad to answer any questions about the life and times of Jared Benteen."

Herman Harker leaned forward. "Look, Mr. Benteen—or Callew. I never saw you before in my life, so how do I know what to ask you?" He looked around the table as if for assistance.

"Well, I can interrogate him," Mark Tate said. "Let's begin with the prep schools you attended, Mr.—er—Callew."

After twenty minutes of intensive questioning the trust officer turned to the others. "I think he's genuine," he re-

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ported. The rest of the group proceeded to introduce themselves and apologize for their suspicions. Loren looked up from inspecting the papers in the leather billfold to describe how Sandy Bryan had come to retain him as her legal adviser.

"But now I have a few questions," Loren went on, "if you don't mind. Why did you disappear four years ago?"

"Disgust," the other replied simply. "Mostly at myself for living well on money that came from legalized mass murder. I had to get away and start over where no one knew me. I went to Canada. It's taken me a long while to get my head together."

"You weren't trying to evade the draft?" Loren asked. "There was a newspaper story that suggested that was the reason you'd disappeared. I think you should retain me to sue that paper for slander."

"That's all ancient history," Benteen-Callew said. "Forget it."

"I could make out a prima facie case of ratio decidendi against them," Loren insisted.

"I couldn't care less."

"All right." Rudolph Vaughn lowered his spectacles to the midpoint of his nose and squinted at the newcomer. "What *do* you care about? Why did you have us all come down here? Why have you kept us on the hook for three days?"

"To relax you. Get you in a good mood, the way a salesman wines and dines a prospective customer. You see, I have a proposal to put to you."

Loren leaned back, waiting. The imitation torchlight threw patterns of brightness and shadow on the speaker's face.

"You would all be rather happy if I were to renounce my right to income from the trust for life. I'm prepared to oblige you, provided you give me something in return. I want each of you to pay me 50% of the value of what you get if I renounce. I want you to sign binding contracts agreeing to pay me those amounts immediately after your shares of the property are transferred to you by the bank. In other words, let's say the total value of the trust property is two million dollars. That's probably close to the right figure but of course I'll want a certified audit of all assets before we close the deal. You, Miss Bryan, and you, Mr. Harker, would get $250,000 apiece, so I want $125,000 from each of you. Mr. Vaughn, you'd receive $300,000, so I'll want $150,000 from you. I keep the right to the income that's already accumulated."

"Four hundred thousand dollars from the three of us," Sandra Bryan muttered.

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"May I ask what you plan to do with the money?" Mark Tate ventured with a banker's natural wariness.

"I told you it's taken me a long while to get my head together. I'm going to use the income that's accumulated and the money I get from these people to make up for some of the horrors Benteen Chemical has caused. I'm going to establish a clinic to treat napalm burns. There are thousands of women and children and old people in Vietnam who were disfigured and half burned alive and never got adequate medical care. With about $800,000 to begin with, I can get more money from some of the charitable foundations, set up research programs, maybe lobby for laws to make it a crime to manufacture things like napalm."

Sandra Bryan's face lost its suspicious look, softened into an expression of sympathy. Herman Harker's beetle brow was furrowed in intense calculation, his wife's gaze narrowed. Mark Tate and Rudolph Vaughn preserved the coolly neutral look of men who were used to dealing with money.

"We'll meet again right here tomorrow night," Callew said. "If you agree, then we can start drafting the contracts. And now I'll leave you to think it over. Good night, gentlemen; ladies." He sprang to his feet with fluid ease and strode out of the lounge.

"Cool customer." Vaughn wiped his glasses thoughtfully.

"He wants a helluva lot of money," Herman Harker complained. "I dunno if I want to give him a hundred twenty-five thou. Come to think of it, we'd all save a lot of bread if he suddenly keeled over with a heart attack or something."

"Herm, you idiot, shut up!" his wife warned, throwing a frightened glance around the room as if a policeman might be sitting at every table.

"I suggest we adjourn this meeting right now," Loren said, "so that each of us can decide what he or she wants to do. Let's meet in my room at four tomorrow afternoon and decide what we're going to say to him."

As they threaded their way through the lounge to the door, Vaughn with his irregular limping walk bringing up the rear, Loren bent to whisper into his client's ear. "The two of us will caucus at three," he said. "You'll have to amuse yourself till then."

"What will you be doing tomorrow morning?" Sandy asked.

In a rapid whisper and with the caution that she not repeat

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his words to anyone, Loren told her.

The Lantana headquarters of the Royal Bahamas Police was a two-story building of pale pink stucco, flanked by a small shopping center and the island's hospital. Colonel Ander, chief of the Criminal Investigation Division, rocked behind his immaculately polished desk of native mahogany as if in rhythm with an inaudible tune. His hair and trim beard were flecked with gray, and aromatic pipe smoke wreathed his coffee-brown face.

In his razor-creased khaki uniform Colonel Ander seemed to Loren like a benevolent black Santa who had somehow put on the wrong suit. And after Loren had presented his credentials as part-time deputy legal adviser to his home city's police department, and had explained the Benteen situation, the colonel like Santa dispensed gifts—of information.

"He has lived here for eight months, renting a house on Nottage Way. He carries a Canadian passport and came from Vancouver, British Columbia. To our knowledge he has not been involved in any illegal activities." The colonel returned the slim file folder to a desk drawer.

"He's an impostor," Loren insisted. "He's posing as Jared Benteen and trying to swindle three of the Benteen relatives out of $400,000. I assume that violates some Bahamian law."

"*If* he is an impostor." Colonel Ander's white teeth flashed in a smile. "Do you have any proof?"

"Look at the letter he sent Sandra Bryan before she came down here." Loren tossed the folded paper onto the desk's gleaming surface. "If I renounce my income, he says, one of the largest shares in the estate will revert to you. Revert! He spent almost a year at Harvard Law School and doesn't know the difference between a reversion and a remainder? That was what first aroused my suspicions, so when we finally met last night I tested him. I misused every legal term I could think of. I called a written defamation of character slander instead of libel. I pressured him to hire me to bring a lawsuit for him—a gross breach of professional ethics. I used the term ratio decidendi, the legal basis for a decision, as if it were a tort. And he never batted an eyelash. He hasn't studied law for six minutes, let alone six months."

"To have forgotten what one learned four years ago is hardly a crime, Professor." The colonel puffed contentedly on his pipe.

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"And by your own admission the man does have proofs of identity. Regrettably I cannot help you *at this point.*"

Loren murmured polite thanks and stood up. He thought he understood why Colonel Ander had emphasized those last three words. They seemed to be a silent suggestion to Loren to drive out to Callew's house on Nottage Way and, if it seemed empty, to find or create a conveniently unlocked window and search the place for evidence.

The idea of policemen breaking the law in order to catch lawbreakers had never appealed to Loren, but then, Loren himself was not a policeman. He bought a map of the island and drove along one of the arterial roads to the intersection of Nottage Way, wrestling with temptation every mile.

What he found when he reached the house was a spotless blue rug, a patch of blood, and the body of Vincent Callew.

Which of the Benteen relatives had decided to enjoy his or her remainder interest in the trust without paying the dead man's price? Had one of the Harkers committed murder rather than donate 50% of his or her share to a clinic for disfigured Vietnamese? Had Rudolph Vaughn with his balance-sheet mind weighed $150,000 against a life and concluded that a life weighed less? And how about his own client, Sandy Bryan? Hard pressed for money—could she have been tempted?

Could all of them have done it together?

He thought a bit more, saw the answer, then without disturbing the evidence used the end of his pen to dial the police.

Late afternoon sun streamed through the west window of Colonel Ander's office and bathed the five of them in light. They sat on folding chairs, their faces tense and expectant as the colonel carried on an interminable phone conversation. Despite the air conditioning they sweated. Sandra Bryan sat on the edge of her chair and bit her lip. On her left Mark Tate fidgeted, crossing one knee over the other, then uncrossing and recrossing them. Rudolph Vaughn blinked impatiently behind his round glasses. Herman Harker played with his knuckles while Maxine Harker scratched her scaly arms.

Loren perched on the edge of the colonel's desk and arranged his thoughts. Interrogation of the five suspects had established that none had a conclusive alibi for the time of the

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murder. Even Herman and Maxine Harker couldn't alibi each other. She claimed to have gone out early to shop for souvenirs and he maintained he had slept late in their hotel suite.

The carving knife in Callew's back had been identified by the cleaning woman as the property of the dead man; the killer was not going to be caught by tracing the weapon. Loren had been too far away to identify the make of the fleeing murderer's car or even to be certain of the figure's sex.

Colonel Ander hung up the phone and lifted two fingers to Loren in an informal salute. "Your reasoning was correct, Professor. That was C.I.D. Headquarters in Nassau. As you know, we telephotoed the dead man's fingerprints to the F.B.I. and Scotland Yard early this afternoon. They have now been identified as belonging to one Nicholas Sargoy, who until today was perhaps the brightest young confidence man known to the Canadian police, and an excellent forger too. He was definitely not the same person as your Jared Benteen. Four years ago when Mr. Benteen was in law school, Mr. Sargoy was serving a prison sentence in Ontario for obtaining money under false pretenses."

"He did have the proper papers," Vaughn pointed out mildly.

"Yes, he did," Loren agreed. "Which suggests that he got them from the real Jared Benteen. They must have met in Canada. Sargoy found out about the trust fund, hatched a scheme to take a few hundred thousand from the remainder-people, stole Jared's papers and probably killed him so he couldn't interfere, practiced forging Jared's signature until he was good enough to fool Carteret National's examiner of questioned documents, then came down here and set you all up for the big con. What he didn't realize was that he was stepping on the toes of another smart operator, one who'd commit murder to protect his own operation. Anyone want to confess yet?"

Loren slid from his desk perch and strode across the room. The five suspects stared at him stonily.

"Let's talk first about motivation," Loren went on as if he were lecturing in a law school classroom. "The only reason a relative of Jared Benteen might have wanted to kill Sargoy would be a desire to speed up receiving his or her share of the Benteen trust. But what does this fact entail? Anybody see it? Colonel?"

"Only a relative who believed

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Mr. Sargoy to be the real Jared Benteen would have that motive," Colonel Ander boomed.

"Exactly. I'm happy to announce that rules out my client. I told Miss Bryan last night, before the murder, that I was convinced Callew was an impostor. So she had no reason to kill him. There's another reason why Miss Bryan is ruled out. I'll get to that in a minute.

"Mr. Vaughn, how about you? You thought the dead man was Benteen. From your last remark I gather you're still hoping against hope that he was Benteen. So you had a motive. *But you also have an artificial foot,* and that rules you out. I was too far away to tell whether the figure that ran out of the dead man's house was a man or a woman, but it was a running figure, and it did not have your irregular stride."

Rudolph Vaughn covered his mouth with a hand and let out a breath of relief.

"Mrs. Harker." Loren pronounced the name with a certain relish. "You still believe the dead man was Jared Benteen, and you're certainly strong-willed enough to commit murder to make you and your husband richer. But you didn't do it either. The dead man's living-room rug, where he fell when he was stabbed, was spotless except for his blood. No place where you go remains spotless, Mrs. Harker."

Loren pointed at the flakes of peeled-off skin that lay around the woman's chair. "Not since you began peeling anyway. You should thank your husband that he didn't wake you up by the pool that afternoon. It may have saved your life."

Sweat poured down Herman Harker's face. "Hey. You—you ruled out everybody but me. I didn't do it! My God, I thought about it but I didn't—"

"I know you didn't," Loren told him. "Remember, I saw the killer speed away from Callew's house in his car. When the car was just a dot in the distance, in the left-hand lane of Nottage Way, I saw the driver make a sharp right turn, without hesitating and without slowing down, across the right-hand lane of Nottage Way and across the right-hand lane of the intersecting road, into the left-hand lane of the intersecting road. To merge into a stream of traffic that skillfully, the driver must have had a lot of experience with the British rules of the road that are in force in the Bahamas. You've had none, Mr. Harker. The night we met you told us this was your first trip outside the United States. This criterion also rules you out, Sandy. I've seen you drive down here, and you're no more famil-

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iar with driving on the left than I am.

"Which leaves just one suspect. A man who'd worked several years in London before being reassigned to Carteret National's New York office. The only one of the group whom Sargoy-Callew would not have considered as having a motive to kill him, and hence the only one to whom the dead man would not be afraid to turn his back. He was stabbed from behind, you'll recall."

Mark Tate's face under its sunlamp tan suddenly went pale as a dead fish.

"I can only guess at your motive, but I think it's a well-founded guess. When Sargoy-Callew said he would demand a certified audit of the Benteen trust as part of his deal, you hit the panic button. How much have you siphoned out of the accumulated income over the past two years? Enough so that you couldn't stand an outside audit, I'll bet. With Benteen, as you thought, out of the way, the trust would be terminated and there'd be a judicial settlement of accounts; but this would have given you the time and opportunity to cover yourself. And if worst came to worst, you could always make one last haul and take off for Brazil or some other place that has no extradition treaty with us."

Loren turned to face the gleaming mahogany desk. "Colonel, now that you know where to look, you shouldn't have any trouble finding the evidence you need. Have the tires of his rental car checked, see if the crushed gravel and plant fragments in the treads match the gravel and vegetation on Nottage Way. Check his shoes for the same traces. Call Jefferson Burke at the Carteret National and suggest that he have an outside auditor examine the Benteen account immediately."

"No! Don't do that!" Tate's voice was a hoarse rasp. He seemed to have shriveled in his seat. "It was self-defense. It was him or me, I tell you. Him or me!" His voice pierced the silence of the room, and at the sound of his breaking Loren shuddered.

In the departure lounge of Lantana Airfield, Sandy Bryan sat on a bright orange plastic chair beneath a poster praising the joys of a Bahamian vacation. "Did you have to be so smart and see *everything?*" she asked Loren. "The real Jared's still missing, we're all as far from getting our shares as ever, and Burke is going to try to make us repay the expense money since that letter of authorization is now proved a forgery."

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"I thought you were convinced lawyers will lie and cover up anything," Loren protested. "So I spill the whole story and you hate me anyway."

"I don't hate you." She reached out her hand to him. "You did the right thing. It just—well, it hurts to know all that money is just going to sit there in the bank and I have to pound that restaurant floor eight or ten hours a day for the next three years."

"Hang in, kitten," Loren said gently. "Don't forget we know something now we didn't know before. Somewhere along the line Sargoy's trail crossed the trail of Jared Benteen. If Jefferson Burke will still speak to me after I helped to get his protégé charged with murder, I'm going to persuade him to hire private detectives to go through the last few years of Sargoy's life with a microscope. With luck, they'll pick up traces of Jared. I'm hoping they'll even find his body. And in a lot less than three years."

Her eyes brightened. "Do you really think it will work?"

"I think so. And oh, yes. My fee will be twenty percent." He studied her expression carefully for signs of shock but found none. "I don't know if that idea of a clinic for napalmed Vietnamese was something the real Jared thought of and mentioned to Sargoy, or whether Sargoy made it up to gain our sympathy. But I like the idea and I'm going to get as many of the other remainderpeople as I can to contribute twenty percent of their shares too."

"The Harkers are a washout," she said. "Make mine forty percent, Loren. I can live on the rest."

The flight to Miami Beach was announced and they walked out into the warm sunlight together.

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a *NEW* Chick Kelly story by

S. S. RAFFERTY

Chick Kelly, the show-biz comic who has his own little night club in Manhattan, is a detective by necessity—that is, he (or someone close to him) gets into a jam with the cops and Chick has to pull the chestnuts out of the fire. Chick the Dick—but by no means Chick the Comic Dick. Chick's slanguage may be strictly comic but his sleuthing is strictly business. And this time Ling Woo, his headwaiter, plunges Chick into the numbers racket—which turns out to be the least of Chick's (and Ling Woo's) worries . . . Press on, Chick!

LIVE AND LET LIVE, CHICK!

by S. S. RAFFERTY

I spotted him from the bar. He and another guy were having lunch in the dining room. I kept an eye on the dude because I don't trust plainclothes guys in general, and undercover cops in particular, in my place. The heavy-set guy was named Corrigan or Colligan or something like that; his partner was a stranger to me, but he was fuzz all the same.

If it was after midnight, I would have been suspicious of an impending narc bust. The musicians who gig my place have been known to have a midnight smack now and then. But here it was, one o'clock in broad daylight, and I've got two covered shields eating $10 lunches. Something is mucho wrong in Denmark, bubby.

"What's with the trance, Chick?" says Barry Kantrowitz, my partner and ex-agent.

"I'm holding a pair of one-eyed jacks in the dining room. Table twelve."

"Cops have to eat too."

"Not at my prices."

"So maybe they're somebody's country cousin. Live and let live, Chick."

"Cops on the take don't toss money around like that. I hope

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to hell some of the guys in the band didn't stash stuff around here last night. That's all I'd need."

"The big guy," Barry said, "isn't a narc—at least, he wasn't."

"You know him?"

"You know him. His name's Coogan."

Bango! The name lit up my lights. Coogan—Sergeant Coogan—one of Lieutenant Jaffee's homicide goons.

"You didn't murder Sylvia this morning, did you, Barry?"

"Twenty years ago I wanted to, but I've mellowed. Ignore it, Chick."

But I can't ignore it. I've had too many sets with Bullethead Jaffee and I have won them all. Jaffee is a sore loser and he'd love to hang one on me, so I always have my guard up. So I watch table twelve.

This is not an easy thing to do, because the noon crowd at the bar are a gregarious group. Along with the bunch talking it up before they go to the track, I get a lot of advertising and PR guys. They never shut up. I am like a juggler shaking hands and dodging jokes and trying to keep an eye on Coogan and Company.

Nothing happens. They feed their faces, slop up their drinks, and start to pony up on the tab. Just before they get up to leave they call Ling Woo, my head-waiter, over and ask him something.

Ling takes out his pad, writes something down, and hands a slip to Coogan. My first reaction is to grab that slip away from him as he is walking out, but what am I going to use for an excuse? Plead a paper shortage? I wasn't about to dip a cop.

When they left I gave Ling the high sign and he comes over to the bar.

"Yes, Mr. Kelly?" he says. Don't be fazed by the formality. Ling is one of my closest friends, but he insists on calling me "Mr. Kelly" in front of customers. It embarrasses me, but he won't stop it.

"Mr. Woo," I put him on, "you just gave a heavy-set guy a slip of paper. Was he a fan asking for your autograph?"

He gave me a smile. "In a way. He wanted our phone number and my name. He said he wanted to give it to his secretary for future reservations. He's going to give us some business, Mr. Kelly."

"He's going to give somebody the business, Mr. Woo. That guy's secretary wears a uniform and carries bracelets that are cold to the touch, especially around the wrist areas."

"Chick, did I do something wrong?"

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The sudden shift to informality tells me I had punched his panic button, and I had no reason to do that.

"No. No, Ling, forget it. I just get the jumps when fuzz are in the place."

"You're sure, Chick?"

"Sure I'm sure. Go peddle some blue-plate specials."

He gave me a grin and trucks back to the dining room. In twenty-four hours none of us would be grinning.

I got the phone call around ten o'clock the next morning. It was Deborah Woo telling me that Ling had been collected by the City, and it wasn't the Department of Sanitation. I got on the phone and called Ted Summers, my lawyer, and find out he's in court. What's my lawyer doing in court? Good lawyers never have to go to court. They keep you out of them. I finally got one of his young assistants who asked if he could help and I said no, but have Summers call me the minute he's free.

I think the kid was hurt by my turndown, but the difference between a young lawyer and a seasoned attorney is the same as a customer's man and a broker on Wall Street. In both cases you are putting a big chunk of yourself in the hands of a rookie. I like Ling too much for that. Actually, I was being kind to the kid. To send him up against Jaffee would be a tank job. Okay, Chick, you'll have to run the play yourself.

I must have been sending out psychic waves, because while I'm thinking about calling Steve Kozak, he calls me. Steve Kozak is a Sergeant on the vice squad; in New York that's tantamount to semi-retirement.

"I thought you'd like to know that Jaffee's busted your headwaiter, Chick."

"I know. What's the rap and where is he?"

"He's at the Fifth. It's Murder One, Chick. A real baddy."

"Who? When? Where?"

"A numbers spotter named Tommy Yee. Got his neck broken at his apartment on Chrystie Street night before last. Your boy was seen in the neighborhood."

"Yeah, mostly because he lives in the neighborhood. Is that all Bullethead has?"

"That's a good description of the Lieutenant, Chick, but it's slanderous. Ling Woo was seen leaving the dead guy's apartment at two thirty in the morning. His prints are all over the place."

"I'm still not impressed, Steve."

"Okay, pally, here's the sinker. The Yee character owed Ling fifteen Gs. They have Ling's slip for that day's bet."

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Now I understand Coogan's handwriting expedition for a sample of Ling's scrawl. Jaffee doesn't miss a trick.

"Who was Yee's banker?"

"Don't know, Chick."

"Steve!"

"Hey, bub, I love you like a brother, but I'm not with the public information office. Yee's controller was Dixie Cabot, so it's got to be a Harlem bank."

"Harlem banks don't welch, and neither do their spotters."

"That's philosophy. This is reality. You'd better get this guy a lawyer."

"I'm into one now. I suppose the Fifth Precinct isn't wired for outgoing calls from freshly pinched citizens."

"You know Jaffee, and remember, I didn't tell you."

I told him okay and hung up. As Barry Kantrowitz would say, what a *tzmmis* this was. Hey, if you're out of breath, rest up for a minute, because we're going to be moving fast from here in. First off, you have to understand the numbers game. It's simple enough. You place a bet with a spotter by writing out the three numbers you pick, the amount you're betting, and your name (or code name). You have to write it down yourself to avoid any misunderstandings. Ling's handwriting specimen seems to be Jaffee's strong card.

The spotter takes all his bet slips and phones them into his banker. You can bet anything from a quarter up, so it's a popular pastime in poor neighborhoods. Many a kid has gone to college on numbers winnings. The odds are 600 to 1, so Ling must have bet $25 to hit for 15 Gs. In New York the number for the day is determined on a 3-5-7 system. You add the win, place, and show payouts of the third race at a designated track and take the digit just before the decimal ($125.68 = number 5). Then do the same in the fifth race, and again for the seventh to get the last two digits.

Okay, back to business. I get on the think. Jaffee took Ling to the Fifth Precinct, which is on Elizabeth Street in Chinatown, so I know he hasn't got this case locked up. If he had, he'd have taken him to Centre Street and booked him. I would bet that he kept Ling in his own district for political reasons and was having a cat-and-mouse session with him.

Of course, there is always the possibility that Ling did it. He's no storybook Chinese with a skinny frame. He's built like a bull. But that's Nutsville. Two things are bothering me. One, Ling never mentioned hitting the numbers big; and two, you don't have to kill a spotter to

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get paid. It's automatic that you get your money.

I make a dozen phone calls before I find someone who knows Dixie Cabot. Zag Howard, who plays bass in the combo at the club, tells me to meet him at the Prime Bar and Grill on 126th Street. I cab it up there and meet him at the bar where I find Zag has a vodka and tonic no lime waiting.

"Man, I don't believe it," he says. "Ling in the man's hands!"

"Yeah, Zag. Where's this Cabot guy?"

"Slow up, buddy. Give a largo beat for a few minutes. The banker for Yee's front wants to help but—well, he's a little leery."

"For crying out loud, Zag, so I'm a white guy asking a black guy to help me spring a yellow guy. I should have brought an Indian with me and we could sing brotherhood songs. We're helping a friend, Zag. I thought we were both color blind."

"Right. It's got nothing to do with color. He just doesn't want to get close to a police case. Come on."

He picked up my drink and I followed him to the rear of the bar where there was a row of old-fashioned wooden booths As we approached the last one a wide-shouldered man in a knit jumpsuit got up.

"Kelly?"

"Chick Kelly."

"I'm Dixie Cabot. Sit down, Mr. Kelly. I won't bother to introduce you. So long, Zag."

The third person in the booth slouched in a corner and toyed with a drink. He was extremely thin and, believe it or not, he was dressed like a banker. I mean a legit banker. They were like two sides of a coin minted by the black rackets. Young, tough, flashy and heavy cool.

"Mr. Kelly," the banker said to me, still playing with the glass, "Zag tells Mr. Cabot that you are trustworthy. I accept Zag's word."

"I appreciate that. What can you tell me?"

"All I can really say is that your friend didn't kill Yee over money. Maybe something else, but not the payoff."

"How do you know?"

"Because Mr. Cabot gave Yee the $15,000."

"Maybe Yee was going to bag Ling."

"That is unlikely, Mr. Kelly. Mr. Cabot's employees are not foolish. Let me explain something to you. The four largest industries in New York are shipping, banking, the garment trade, and the numbers. There are over one hundred thousand employees turning a daily handle that would astound you. Because we are considered il-

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legal by the state, one might make the mistake of thinking we are also unethical. We are not. We cannot afford to welsh. A man who scrapes together a fifty-cent piece to make a bet must have faith in our integrity."

All the time the banker is talking, Cabot's got his eye on me. Glued on me like a cat so that I have to review everything I say in my mind before I open my mouth. I wasn't ready to share the banker's undying faith in his people. All I have is Cabot's word that he gave Yee the dough.

"Okay," I said. "If Ling never got the money, who did?"

"We have inquired around, but it is difficult in that neighborhood—for my people, I mean."

"Something just occurred to me. Could it have been a mob hit?"

"No." That's all he said. No. But he said it too emphatically, like he was dismissing a bad thought.

"Tell me, were there any other players that had the winning number that day?"

"With Yee? No," Cabot said.

"How about other spotters? Did anyone have the number that paid off?"

"Yes, one other."

"Did he get paid? I mean, no accidents or anything."

"He got his money."

"How many bets did Yee call in?"

"That is confidential." The banker smiled.

"Not the handle, just the number of players."

Cabot looked at his boss and got the nod. He took a sheet of paper out of his pocket and counted with his finger. "Twenty-eight."

"All regular bettors?"

"That's hard to tell—at least one is."

"How can you tell?"

"There's one 769 player."

"Let me explain, Mr. Kelly." The banker stopped playing with the glass and actually took a sip. "769 is considered the lucky number, and hundreds of regulars play it every day. Bankers call it the 'death number' because if it ever comes up it could wipe out a lot of banks in the city."

"Has it ever come up? I'm serious."

"Yes, you are getting an education, aren't you? It has come up on several occasions. And everyone was paid."

"Twenty-five bucks is a pretty large bet in a small-change action. I mean no offense."

"If you are implying that we would be hurt by such a large payoff, you're wrong. It was a Dick, Your Daddy Is Dead deal.

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In your language, it was laid off to spread the risk."

I might have been getting an education, but I wasn't getting much information. I wanted to take a look at Cabot's bet sheet, but I had no chance of that.

"That's about all we can tell you, Mr. Kelly. I'm sorry, but we must be going." The banker closed it off.

When we were getting out of the booth and I was saying goodbye to them, I gave my glass a shove and we all had to move fast to stay dry.

Out on the street I started getting a little panicky and I know I can't chance a cab, so I shot over to the 125th Street subway station and hit it lucky. The downtown express had just pulled in and I hopped it. I gave up on the cab because I needed to be in a crowd. When Cabot found that I had dipped his pocket for the bet sheet, I'd need the protection of witnesses.

I got off at the Brooklyn Bridge station and took a cab to Elizabeth Street.

The only thing I don't like about the Kelly kisser is that I often get taken for a cop. This time I was glad to have it. I walked into the Fifth Precinct like I was the Commissioner himself.

"Regan from the 19th," I said to the Desk Sergeant. "Where's Jaffee?"

"Second floor," he said, giving me a wave. A second cop pointed to an open doorway. Jaffee was sitting at a desk reading some papers which I hoped weren't Ling's statement. When he finally looked up it was with a start.

"How the hell did you get in here?"

"You know, Lieutenant, I don't think you know how to say hello, or hi ya, or what's up, Doc?"

"If you're not out of here in two minutes I'll lock you up."

"How can you lock up a counsel come to see a client?"

"The only bar exam you ever took was made of mahogany."

"No, I mean it. I didn't say I was an attorney. I'm here with a message from his lawyer."

"What lawyer?"

"Ted Summers, Esquire. He's tied up and he sent me down here to talk to Ling."

"How did you know he was here? Someday I'm going to find the guy who leaks you information and I'm going to have his head."

"Where else would you take a guy arrested in Chinatown?"

"Baloney. You know more than you're showing."

"All I know is that Ling Woo, my employee, has been arrested. What have you got him for, spitting on the sidewalk? Can I see him now?"

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Jaffee is getting soft in his old age, because it only took me ten minutes to badger him into giving me the green light. I think the Civil Liberties Union speech did it.

Ling looked scared, which bothers me. Jaffee has got the edge when you're afraid. I gave him a five-minute pep talk that would have made Knute Rockne sound like a pessimist, then I go to work.

"They have a strong lock on you, Ling, because one of Yee's neighbors saw you coming out of his apartment. What's the scam?"

Ling tells me that he wasn't in the apartment at all. He had a message from Yee to drop around and he did, around 2:30 A.M. after he left the club.

"I knocked on the door a couple of times, got no answer, and figured he wasn't home. The lady across the hall must have seen me as I turned from the door to leave."

"Okay, that can be explained away. Did you try to open the door? It was unlocked, according to the police."

"Why would I try to open another man's door?"

"That sounds like it came out of Confucius. Do you have some quaint adage to explain how your fingerprints got inside the apartment?"

His answer was plausible. It was plausible to me, but I couldn't vouch for a jury. Ling tells me he had been to Yee's place many times and probably touched a lot of things.

"Okay, let's go for the nuggets. A $25 bet on the numbers is a healthy bet. Do you always bet that big?"

"You know me, Chick." He gave me a weak smile.

Yeah, I know him. The Fantan King, the Prince of Poker. Ling is the only guy in the world that would handicap odds on his own murder trial.

"Why the big silence on hitting for fifteen big ones? You're modest, but not *that* modest."

"Honestly, Chick, I didn't know that I hit. You don't hit the number, the number hits you. I never check the papers for the results."

"Would Yee try to welsh?"

"He'd have to be crazy. The bankers would kill him. Besides, he was getting his ten percent tip on the fifteen thousand."

I took out the sheet I picked off Cabot, showed it to him, and asked him if any of the names were familiar to him. He tells me negative, which is no surprise because most of the names are nicknames or first names. When I asked him why he had used his real name he said, "Do you know how many Lings there are in Chinatown?"

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I tell Ling to keep his mouth shut until Ted Summers gets there and make for the street.

I call Barry from a corner phone booth and tell him to keep after Summers, who must be trying the case of the century.

Now what am I going to do? When I lifted Cabot's bet sheet, I put a target on my back. Sooner or later he would miss it and put two and two together, and it might be boom-boom time in my young life. The safest place for me to stay was right here in Chinatown, so I head for Reefers.

I'm not going to tell you what Reefers is, because I don't want to corrupt you. I won't tell you where it is, either, because that's the best kept secret in lower Manhattan. Besides, just getting into the place requires such a rigamarole that you'd probably say the hell with it.

You have to go to a small chop suey joint and order something that's not on the menu. Then you follow the waiter through the kitchen into a back alley and across to a door in another building. Once you're inside, you take a freight elevator to the third floor, where you get off into a small foyer with a single door—and once that door opens, it's like Judy Garland's first look at the Land of Oz.

In the eight or nine times I have been there, I have never gotten over the effect of its serenity. It has a lushness that never quite sates, nor do you want it to. It has the warmth of sleep and the softness of the demi-dark. There is nothing in the center hall. No furniture. No drapes or carpets. Just the coal-black marble floor and dead white walls. Yet amid this bareness there is the beauty of simplicity.

At the Reefers, Mai Sung's clogs tapped across the floor toward me. They have a word in Mandarin that Ling once used to describe her—willow-walking. He also told me that she had eyes for me, but I have a strong sense of self-preservation and an accurate accounting of my weaknesses. I kept my distance because a poor old man named Coleridge once warned me about dining on honeydew and the milk of Paradise.

When I told her I wanted a room, a phone, and a bottle of vodka, I got them without question. She instinctively knew I had business with the outside world because the room she picked was like a suburbanite's library-den. Which put a snap of reality into me.

I had to come up with an answer to this mess, and I spent a good hour going over

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everything in my mind. I really had two problems. Get Ling cleared and get the numbers hoods off my tail. Then I came up with a way to do both. It was chancy, but it just might work.

I call Mario Puccini, a guy who runs a limo service, among other things, and tell him what I want.

"You gotta be smoking something strange, Chick."

"And I don't want to talk to a street soldier, Mario. He has to be a Capo or better. Someone who can take it directly to the top. Now please stop arguing and get on it." I gave him the phone number and sat tight.

I figured it this way. If I could get the mob to believe that the numbers guys suspected *them* of knocking off Yee, I would get some action. Now, the action could be World War III, but I doubted it. The mob had been letting the Harlem banks creep southward as long as they stayed in the numbers business and kept out of everything else. The mob wouldn't want to give the impression that they were taking back the territory for fear of competition in other areas. It's a delicate balance.

If the mob bought my little tale, they would knock themselves out proving their innocence, and that meant finding the killer. That gets Ling out of the slammer. Also, if the mob thinks I have done them a good turn, they can square me with Cabot. Maybe.

We met in the back seat of Mario's limo and talked while Mario tooled over the Brooklyn Bridge. I know my companion in the back seat has to be way up in the organization because he is very cool and restrained. He looked more like a lawyer than a hood.

"If what you say is true, Kelly, then we've got a problem. But how do I know it's true, beyond your word?"

I took the bet sheet out of my pocket. "This is the day's handle for one Harlem banker. You don't just pick them up at a newsstand. Believe me, I know what I'm talking about."

He took the sheet and looked it over. "That's a good handle. Thought you said your pal's name was Ling."

"Ling Woo." I pointed to the name.

"231—that wasn't the winning number. The death number came up that day. Every banker from here to Red Hook went for his lungs. The number was 769."

"The death number came up in Brooklyn, Sal," Mario said from the front seat.

"Oh, yeah. I'm getting what they call provincial."

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"Wait a minute," I said. "You mean there's a different number in Brooklyn? I never knew that."

"Sure, Chick," Mario said. "There are all kinds of systems. In Manhattan they use the 3-5-7 system. In Brooklyn they take the total of the first seven races. In some towns they don't use the races at all. I know a place up in Connecticut where they use the last three numbers in the daily Treasury Bond sale listing. It don't matter where you get a number from, as long as it can't be rigged."

"Let me see that list a minute," I ask Sal. "There was one person who played 769 on Yee's part of this sheet. Could it be that some guy, a guy from Brooklyn, finds himself over in Manhattan maybe. He has a feeling about 769, so he asks around, finds Yee, and puts it down. The guy waits for the number that night over in Brooklyn and thinks he's got money coming to him because he computes the winning number on the Brooklyn system. He goes to Yee to collect and the spotter tells him to get lost—the winning number is 231, on the Manhattan system. Bango! The guy gets mad, breaks Yee's neck, and takes off with the dough being held for Ling."

"That's a nice story, Kelly, and even if it were true, how could you prove it?"

"Well, this is a start. Look, the only 769 number bet was made by a guy named 'Sandy.' All we have to do is find a guy named Sandy who lives and thinks Brooklyn. And I'll bet he's a working stiff too, because he only bet two bucks."

"Kelly, did you ever hear of a needle in a haystack?"

"How many soldiers do you have in Brooklyn? I know you're not going to tell me, but you probably have more guys on the street than the cops have. Get them working."

Old Sal damn near choked on that. He hasn't been ordered to do anything since he was seven and a half. He sat there for a few minutes looking at the scenery.

"It's worth a shot," he said. "Mario, let me off at the next corner. Where can I reach you, Kelly?"

"Mario knows where to phone me."

I had Mario drop me off at Foley Square where he had picked me up. Mario is an okay guy, but I didn't want anyone to know where I was. Especially a guy who is buddy-buddy with my pal Sal.

For two days I sat in the room at the Reefers drinking vodka and increasing my knowledge of Chinese food. I kept

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checking with the club and finally Summers makes contact, but he couldn't spring poor Ling. Then I get the call. They had located an electrician out in Cypress Hills, out near the cemetery, who bet 769 with his local book. He is also flashing a wad.

"He looks like your pigeon, Chick. Do you want the boys to pick him up?"

"Hell, no, Mario. Just keep an eye on him to make sure he doesn't blow town. Is your friend going to square me uptown?"

"It's done, but I'd stay out of a guy named Cabot's way."

"Sure, sure. Got to go, pal. Thanks."

So I've got one more phone call to make and it's all wrapped up. But what's the use of wrapping something up if you don't make it fancy? Put a bow on it? Sure, the straight-arrow thing to do is present the deal to Jaffee and let him handle it. But I've got a bent bow and a crooked quiver when it comes to Bullethead. I dialed.

"Sergeant Kozak," he said, sounding like he was the F.B.I. chief.

"This is your friendly saloonkeeper. Steve, can you find out who was the lowest scoring guy on the last Civil Service test for Police Sergeant?"

"What are you, handing out Boob of the Year awards?"

"No, we know who wins that one. I just want to help a career along."

So I lay it on him. I'll give the guy all the lowdown he'll need to be a hero. Well, Steve comes through with the name and the rest is NYPD history. One of the dumbest cops on the force solves a case that Jaffee couldn't crack. Beautiful, Kelly. It's a masterstroke.

The capper on this little episode came when Ted Summers and I went down to Centre Street to pick up Ling. Who do I meet in the hall but Bullethead himself. As he passes me, glaring like a wounded bull, I take out a dollar bill and press it on him. "Two of your guys left that as a tip at my joint the other day at lunch. I'm returning it because we don't accept fifty-cent tips. Tell them the numbers spotters do, but they shouldn't bet their badge numbers. It's unlucky."

Always leave 'em laughing, folks.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Raffles adventure by

BARRY PEROWNE

In which the charmed lives of A. J. Raffles, the Amateur Cricketer and Cracksman, and Bunny Manders, A.J.'s chronicler and chum, are intersected by other lives in the yellowbook pages of the fin de siècle—those of the notorious poet-playwright-scandalmaker known as Convict C.3.3. and later as Sebastian Melmoth, of Aubrey Beardsley, and of the Marquess of Queensberry . . .

RAFFLES AND THE BRIDGE OF SIGHS

by BARRY PEROWNE

On the night he fell foul of the Mad Marquess, as that brawling nobleman who propounded Rules for the Prize Ring was generally known, A. J. Raffles was sitting with me at a table in Willis's Supper Rooms.

A celebrated London after-theatre resort, all red plush, gilding, and ornate gasoliers, the place was noisy with the confident voices of people of rank and fashion.

"You know, Bunny," Raffles said to me, his evening dress immaculate, his dark hair crisp, his keen face tanned from a recent cricket tour abroad, "no man can choose the name with which he's born, and in normal circumstances he goes right through life with it."

On our way here we had passed a theatre where a brave but vain attempt was being made to revive a witty comedy by a poet and playwright whose name, owing to a scandal just over two years before, it was not now prudent to include on the theatre posters.

I thought it was this which had prompted Raffles' remark, but

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he added "For a woman, of course, the matter of names is rather different."

Warming his brandy-snifter between his fine brown hands, he glanced across with meditative grey eyes at the orchestra-dais, to which his only living relative, his sister Dinah, had gone to ask that a piece be played that she particularly wanted to hear.

A graceful, fair-haired girl of twenty-one, with a clean-cut quality and an air of friendly composure akin to her brother's, she stood chatting to the orchestra leader and his melodists in their Hungarian gypsy costume.

Understanding now what had prompted Raffles' remark about names, I said, "You mean different for a woman in the sense that she changes her name when she marries?"

He nodded, his eyes on Dinah. And a tension began to grow in me, for, oddly enough, I knew more about his sister than he did.

In accordance with the terms of their father's will, Dinah as a child of seven had been placed under the guardianship of an uncle in Australia, while the residue of the estate had been used to see Raffles, then 14, through his father's old school in England.

Dinah had been fond of her uncle, who had brought her up well, and on his recent demise she had decided to leave Australia and come to London. She had arrived, seeking her brother, while he was away on the cricket tour. So, naturally, I had appointed myself her brother-by-proxy.

Women being ineligible for residence in The Albany, the bachelor establishment where Raffles had his chambers, I had obtained accommodations for Dinah adjacent to my own small flat in Mount Street, so that I could keep an eye on her. In this I had had no difficulty. On the contrary, my difficulty had been to keep my eyes off her.

In fact, I soon had become conscious of aspirations concerning her that were quite incompatible with my role as brother-by-proxy, so it had come as a relief to me to be freed of that hampering status by Raffles' return from the cricket tour.

"Consider, Bunny," he said now, as he offered me a Sullivan from his cigarette-case, "my way of life. At any moment, its criminal side may be exposed. My transgressions are different from those of that poor devil of a playwright—"

"Of whom," I murmured, "some wise Clubman remarked, 'I don't care what people do, as long as they don't do it in the streets and frighten the horses.' "

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"It's not horses that are frightened of scandal," Raffles said. "It's London Society people. That playwright's transgressions put him in the same place my very different transgressions would put me—in the dock at the Old Bailey. I'm currently captain of the England cricket team, and every door in the land is open to me. If I were charged at the Old Bailey as a criminal, you can imagine the unholy scandal. What effect would it have on Dinah's prospects in life if the disaster happened while her surname still is Raffles?"

I took a gulp of brandy. My main aspiration concerning Dinah was that I might be able to persuade her, some happy day, to change her surname to my own, Manders.

"You want to see her married?" I said.

He nodded. "Safely, happily married, Bunny—though not, of course, to an Englishman. If I come a cropper, I don't want Dinah to be living in this country when it happens. I want her well away from the scandal. Otherwise, I'd like nothing better than to see her married to an Englishman—some sound, loyal chap. You, for instance. But that can never be, Bunny, because if some day I stand in the dock at the Old Bailey, I'm afraid it's inevitable —God forgive me for it—that you'll be standing there beside me."

I felt as if I had been hit by a sledgehammer. Not only had he made his point, he had impaled my heart on it. Fortunately, he did not notice my emotion, for just then an altercation at the doorway of the Supper Rooms attracted his attention.

"It's a small world, Bunny," he said wryly. "That playwright's out of gaol now, living in obscurity abroad somewhere. But there's the very man who, because of his titled and fatally attractive son's friendship with the playwright, started the scandal that put the poor devil in prison for two years."

At the doorway stood the most vindictive man in London, the Mad Marquess. Short, thick-set, choleric, he was slightly bowlegged in his evening dress, for in his youth he had been notorious for riding his horses in the Grand National till they burst their hearts. Blackballed from decent Clubs because of his persistent brawling, he was at it again now, fulminating like a balding, beetlebrowed ape at the unfortunate Head Waiter.

The Marquess' usual cronies were shifty jockeys and musclebound pugilists, and he had four of the latter with him now, bullet-headed heavyweights, lumpy in their evening-dress, and there was also in the party a handsome, orange-haired woman

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flamboyantly gowned—a notorious courtesan known to dissolute men-about-town, for reasons sufficiently reprehensible, as "Skittles."

"It's Skittles," said Raffles, "that the Head Waiter doesn't want to admit."

"And no wonder," I said—for as the browbeaten Head Waiter surrendered and reluctantly led the Marquess' party to a table, half the women in the place, followed by their escorts, swept out with their chins in the airs.

The party, with the Marquess guffawing and Skittles wielding her fan with an air of supercilious triumph, passed close by the orchestra dais and the Marquess stopped suddenly.

"What, no music?" he said. "Play *The Beautiful Blue Danube*."

The orchestra leader, violin and bow in hand, glanced uncertainly at Dinah, with whom he had been talking.

"You heard what I said," bawled the Marquess. "Play *The Blue Bloody Danube*."

Raffles said, "Excuse me a moment, Bunny," and rose and walked over to the orchestra dais.

"Dinah," he said, "is *The Blue Danube* the piece you want to hear?"

"Why, no," she said. "I asked for one of Brahms' Hungarian Dances."

"And did the orchestra leader say he would play it for you?"

"Yes," Dinah said quietly.

"Then on the principle," Raffles said, "of first come, first served, that is what the orchestra will now play. Please go and sit down and enjoy it."

In the deathly hush, Dinah came and joined me at our table. Raffles remained looking without expression at the Marquess, who stared back with a dark flush slowly engorging his simian face. New shoes sqeaked on the red plush carpet as the four bruisers, massive and scowling, took station on both sides of their squat patron.

Tense, my heart pounding, I rose to go to Raffles' side. But the Marquess, just then, flung out a hairy forefinger at him and said thickly, "*I shall remember you*!" Turning, he exploded at the trembling Head Waiter, "What are you standing there for?"

The orchestra leader, with a glance at Raffles, tucked his violin under his chin, and the thrall that had held the people in the Supper Rooms immobile was broken by a buzz of voices as the

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melodists launched into the lilt of a Brahms Hungarian Dance.

Raffles rejoined us, saying, as he sat down, "Dinah, I'm sorry that should have happened."

"I'm not," she said, a little breathless, her grey eyes shining. "For I've found my brother."

True to his intention of putting Dinah in the way of making an advantageous foreign marriage, Raffles in the following week took her to Paris and, at the warm insistence of them both, I accompanied them.

Raffles had with him letters of introduction from people of social consequence in London to people of like consequence in Paris. As a result, the three of us were soon caught up in a whirl of *salons* and dinner-parties, and Raffles received many compliments on the appearance and comportment of his sister.

"Which is all very pleasing, Bunny," he said to me, privately, "but keep your eyes open for some grist to the mill. With a foreign marriage my objective for Dinah, I have to bear in mind a custom of well-regulated European families."

"What custom, Raffles?"

"The custom of the dowry, Bunny."

To give Dinah a change from formal occasions, one free evening we took her over to the Left Bank, and among the places at which we dropped in, looking for amusement, chanced to be a Waxworks Museum.

The effigies were arranged in groups, each figure having propped at its feet a card bearing a number by which the effigy, with a brief history of its original's claim to celebrity, could be identified in the catalogue—which I was carrying and from which, when asked by Dinah, I read out to her the information relevant to such effigies as attracted her attention.

We came to a group of figures which, in the harsh glare of gaslight, leered out through the iron bars of a cage bearing a placard with the titles *Les Ames Damnées*—The Damned Souls.

Some of the figures in the cage wore the striped pyjamas and frayed straw sombreros of felons condemned to Devil's Island, but I noticed, with a shock, one whose ample girth was clad in coarse trousers and tunic stamped all over with the broad arrows of the English prison system.

"Dinah," Raffles said, at once, "there's a group over there we mustn't miss."

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He steered her firmly away from the iron cage—for several times, as I knew, he had dined at the tables of London Society people in the company of the poet and playwright whose effigy, with shoulder-length waved hair parted in the centre and a slim volume open in one hand, stood now, branded, among the felons.

I lingered a moment, fascinated. Stencilled on the breast of the effigy's tunic was the prison number, C.3.3., and on the slim volume which the effigy held open at its title page—*The Ballad of Reading Gaol, by C.3.3.*—lay a shrivelled green carnation.

Chilled, I turned away and, thrusting the catalogue hastily into the side pocket of my suit, joined Dinah and Raffles.

We had a late supper at the Closerie des Lilas, a lively restaurant in the *quartier,* and, later still, dropped in for a nightcap at a *café* in the Boulevard Saint-Michel. There were half-a-dozen or so men standing in a row at the bar, but few of the tables were occupied—and we had only just sat down and given our order to the waiter when Dinah put a hand on Raffles' sleeve.

"There's a man over there," she said, "who seems to know you."

We followed her glance. And my heart sank like a stone.

In the all too abundant flesh, grown now bloated and debauched, the man looking at Raffles across the *café* was he whose effigy stood in the cage of *Les Ames Damnées.*

Meeting Raffles' eyes, the man turned away his head.

My heart thumped as I wondered what, with his sister with him, Raffles would do.

After an instant of hesitation, he excused himself to Dinah and walked across to the table where ex-Convict C.3.3., gross in his rumpled evening dress, sat in the company of a young man in his early twenties who could hardly have made a greater contrast, for his light tweed travelling-suit hung on his painfully lank figure as on a skeleton.

Rich and resonant, with a hint of brogue and a slur of drunkenness in it, the ex-convict's voice reached Dinah and me clearly across the *café.*

"Well, well," he said, as, still seated, he offered Raffles three fat fingers of a languid hand to shake. "An Englishman who doesn't cut me dead! But I suppose A. J. Raffles would consider that not quite *cricket?*"

"Bunny," Dinah murmured, "why did the man say that?"

"He's a man, Dinah," I said guardedly, "who made a mistake and has rather fallen in life."

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"What was his mistake, Bunny?" Dinah asked.

His mistake, apart from having been too greatly charmed by the Mad Marquess' attractive but capricious son, had been in not getting out of England when he had the chance. Instead, with Irish insouciance and the green-dyed carnation of an aesthete defiant in his buttonhole, he had remained to stand alone, deserted by the Marquess' son, in the dock at the Old Bailey.

But I said, "His mistake, Dinah, was to be born out of his time. He'd have been understood in the Athens of Pericles, but he wasn't understood in the land of the Widow at Windsor, so people don't want to know him any more."

"*I* want to know him," said Dinah.

Before I could stop her, she rose and walked over to the table where Raffles stood talking with the two seated men, and I had perforce to follow.

"You're a fine brother," she said to Raffles. "You desert me."

"Sebastian Melmoth," the ex-convict said quickly, heaving up his bulk from his chair. "And may I present my gifted young friend, Aubrey Beardsley."

As the wand-thin youth, with his refined face of an almost transparent pallor, bowed to Dinah, the waiter approached with a tray and asked Raffles if the drinks we had ordered were to be served now at this table.

Making the best of the situation I knew he would gladly have avoided, Raffles said, "If these gentlemen will drink with us—?"

Absinthe, *garcon."* said Melmoth, as ex-Convict C.3.3. evidently now called himself, and he explained to Dinah, as we all sat down, "The green hue of absinthe is restful to the cultivated eye." Cultivated as they no doubt were, his own eyes were also bloodshot, with bags under them, as he went on, "Young Beardsley here is only in Paris for one night. He's on his way to convalesce in the mild climate of Mentone, and we ran into each other on the quay named for that horrid little monkey of a genius, Voltaire."

"Is it Mr. Melmoth you're sketching, Mr. Beardsley?" Dinah asked, for the frail youth was adding touches, with a stylus pen, to a drawing on a small sketch-block.

He shook his head. "I'm sketching the backs of those men standing in a row, like a kind of frieze, at the bar over there. D'you like it?"

Tearing it from the block, he gave Dinah the sketch.

"Only their backs," she said, comparing the sketch with the row

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of men at the bar, "yet—somehow—you've caught them perfectly."

"For that kind remark," said Beardsley, "you shall have it. How are you called, Miss Raffles—by your friends?"

"I'm called Dinah, Mr. Beardsley."

"Then I shall inscribe this," said the artist, doing so, " 'For Dinah—*Arte per l 'Arte*—Aubrey Beardsley.' "

As he presented Dinah with the sketch, the waiter came with a glass of warm milk for him and the absinthe for Melmoth.

"Your brother, Miss Dinah," Melmoth said, licking his sensuous lips at sight of the absinthe, "is instructing you in the ways of the world, I trust?"

"I'm learning something new from him every day, Mr. Melmoth."

"Raffles, the cricketer," said Melmoth, "in the role of Pygmalion. But how bizarre!"

"Bizarre?" said Dinah. "I don't know what you mean."

"Alas," sighed Melmoth, "I so seldom mean what I say!"

He drank his absinthe. But it was clear, as we sat talking, that his wit was gone, quenched by the vindictive persecution, with its dire results, of the Mad Marquess. Melmoth called for more absinthe, grew drunker and maudlin, until presently young Beardsley, taking a sip of his milk, coughed painfully and a sudden froth of blood appeared on his lips. He clapped his handkerchief to them, and I saw on Melmoth's big, vealy face a look of poignant concern.

"Aubrey," he said gently, "it's late, dear boy, for we decadents to be abroad, and you've a train to catch in a few hours. Look there at the window! Day breaks on the Boul' Mich'—*And down the silent, sleeping street. The dawn, with silver-sandalled feet. Creeps like a frightened girl.* Come, Aubrey my dear, I'll take you to your hotel."

Bloated and rumpled, he heaved himself up, took from the table his silk hat and turquoise-knobbed ebony stick.

"Perhaps we shall meet again," he said to us, as he handed young Beardsley his travelling-cap. "Aubrey goes to the healing climate of Mentone, and I—who knows whither?" He clapped his silk hat on his straggle of shoulder-length, greying hair, and shrugged, with a wry smile. "Melmoth the Wanderer! Come, Aubrey."

The bulky, destroyed poet put an arm protectively about the thin shoulders of the young artist, and, as they left us, we sat

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down again; but somehow, for a while, we had nothing to say.

It was Raffles who, quite suddenly, broke the silence between us: "Dinah, let me see that sketch."

Dinah gave it to him, he glanced at it, then over at the bar, then handed the sketch to me. It portrayed, as a frieze in Indian ink, the backs of half-a-dozen or so men of assorted shapes and sizes standing in a row. I looked over at the men standing at the bar. In the row there, a gap had appeared. I looked again at the sketch, which showed no gap—and my scalp suddenly tingled.

"Come on," said Raffles, tossing some coins onto the marble tabletop.

He hurried Dinah and me out, and he and I looked quickly each way along the Boulevard Saint-Michel. The breaking day was redolent of fresh-ground coffee and new-baked bread, but there was nobody to be seen except a man with a hose spraying the sidewalk trees and the gutters.

"What are you looking for?" Dinah asked us.

"A cab," said Raffles. "It's time you were in bed."

But what Raffles and I were looking for were two men whose backs appeared side by side in young Beardsley's sketch—a short man with the slight build of a jockey and a tall man with the burly build of a pugilist.

We had no idea where the ex-convict who now called himself Sebastian Melmoth was living in Paris.

"In any case, Bunny," Raffles said to me later, in private, "the fact that the Mad Marquess' chosen cronies are small jockeys and big bruisers is a pretty thin reason for warning Melmoth that it's possible he's being watched."

"Personally," I said, "I didn't notice the oddly assorted couple leave the bar. They *may* have been following Melmoth, but I think they were just a coincidence. After all, Raffles, the Marquess did, more than two years ago, what he set out to do. He wrecked Melmoth's life. What possible motive could the Marquess have now for having the poor devil spied on?"

"I don't know, Bunny," Raffles said. "Anyway, confound it, it's none of our business. Forget it! A dowry for Dinah, that's our business now—or mine, anyway."

He had no suspicion of my own feelings about Dinah and, twisting the hooks in my own heart, I managed to say, "Your business, Raffles, is my business—as always."

He smiled. "Good old Bunny!"

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So it was with a dowry for Dinah in the forefront of his mind that we left Paris, some days later, and took Dinah off to Venice, where Raffles had a letter of introduction to present.

On the day when the three of us, Dinah with a pretty parasol raised against the burning sunshine, disembarked from a gondola at a splendid old *palazzo* on the Grand Canal, the major-domo informed us that the Principessa was not in residence, having repaired to her country place in the Tuscan hills.

Raffles said that, in the circumstances, he would mail the letter to the Principessa's country place, and leaving our calling cards with the major-domo, we went back down the steps and Raffles told Salvatore, our gondolier, to take us to the Piazza San Marco, the hour being now hard upon teatime.

At the barber-pole mooring-posts of the Piazza gondola quay, Raffles tipped Salvatore handsomely and, with Dinah arm-in-arm between us and flocks of pigeons waddling away and flapping up before us, we sauntered across the great square, to our left the soaring Campanile, to our right the Doge's Palace and the lofty, tessellated porch of St. Mark's Cathedral topped by the equine statuary group once stolen by the greatest burglar in the annals of crime, the Emperor Napoleon.

We passed into the welcome shade of the colonnaded arcade to our left, where, on the sidewalk, the tables of the Caffé Florian were set out.

"Why, look!" Dinah exclaimed. "There's Mr. Melmoth!"

My spirits sank. The overweight aesthete, in a white alpaca suit that would have been the better for pressing, and wearing a boater with a faded ribbon on his straggling locks, sat alone with his absinthe at a table.

"So!" he said resonantly. "Melmoth the Wanderer and Pygmalion the Cricketer, with his malleable maiden, meet again!" With a majestic but wavering gesture, for he certainly had been looking upon the absinthe at its greenest, he made us free of chairs at his table. "I'm here, in this city of rendezvous, where the mercantile West meets the gorgeous East—with the permission of that old bore Wordsworth—to keep a rendezvous myself."

"A happy one for you, I hope, Mr. Melmoth," said Dinah.

"As to that, Miss Dinah," said ex-Convict C.3.3., " '*King Pandion is dead. All his friends are lapped in lead.*' And yet—and yet, Miss Dinah—'*I have had playmates, I have had companions*—' "

He looked out with pouched eyes at the Piazza San Marco as

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though he saw, through the glaze of heat quivering there, English willows in summers gone, and himself, bland with success, idly propelling a punt for the indulgence of a graceful, capricious youth in blazer and straw boater, reclining on the cushions.

Suddenly, to my embarrassment, tears rolled down Melmoth's puffy cheeks.

"It *could* be a happy rendezvous," he murmured, "after so long. It *could* be." Groping for his turquoise-knobbed stick, he rose heavily. "I'm expecting a telegram. I must go to my hotel again and ask if it's come at last. Oh, I *do* hope it's come. Forgive me, Miss Dinah."

Blindly, he walked out under the arch of the colonnade into the white lightning of the sun. And Dinah, perhaps a little upset by the man's emotion, took up from the table the list of the Caffé Florian's ice-creams and gazed at it, biting her lip.

I looked out at Melmoth. Pigeons rose before him as he made his way diagonally across the great square. An opening to the left of St. Mark's Cathedral swallowed him in shade. And two men strolled out from the cathedral porch on the far side of the square—two men in cloth caps, a little man like a jockey and a big man like a bruiser. The gap of shade that had engulfed Melmoth swallowed them.

I met Raffles' eyes. He stood up, saying, "I'm going to buy some cigarettes. I won't be long."

But not until I was dressing for dinner that evening did I see him again, when he walked into my room at our hotel looking out on the lagoons.

"Bunny," he said, "they followed Melmoth to his hotel. The little fellow's a baby-faced, sly-eyed young Cockney called Twitch. He stayed to keep an eye on Melmoth's hotel. The big bruiser's called Josser. I trailed him to a back canal, where he went into a *Pensione*. It's evidently where they're lodging. Tonight, when Dinah's retired, you and I'll take a prowl around that *Pensione* and see if we can find out what their game is."

"What d'you think about this 'rendezvous' of Melmoth's?"

"I'm afraid, Bunny, it's the one rendezvous in this life he should not keep."

Venice in the small hours. Moonlight and uncanny silence. No hoofs, no whipcracks, no hansoms, no horses. A city without wheels.

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By narrow sidewalks edging devious waterways, Raffles and I reached the *Pensione.* The word was visible, in the moonlight, over the iron-studded door of the tall old building which, with its shuttered windows, stood at the junction of two canals.

"How does one get to it?" I asked, looking at the building across the gap of stagnant canal water.

"Plank drawbridge," said Raffles. "It was down when I followed Josser here. It's been pulled up now and chained beside the door over there." He put a hand on my arm. "Listen!"

A vague mutter of men's voices was coming from the direction of the side of the building. As we listened, a voice unmistakably Cockney rose louder, exclaiming, "Garn!"

We moved to our right. The narrow, cobbled sidewalk angled sharply to edge the other canal, at the side of the *Pensione.* From the one open window in the tall side of the building, dim lamplight fell across the stagnant water. The window was not much above our own level. High up, moonlight silvered the eaves of the building.

We moved along the sidewalk, against which barges stinking of rotten fruit and vegetables were moored in line, and we came opposite the lamplit window. The voices of the men in the room were clearly audible to us now across the canal.

"Garn, you big baboon, use your loaf, Josser! 'E got 'is bleedin' telegram, didn't 'e? 'Oo else would it be from but young Lord Alf, the Marquess' dandy son? 'E laid low, did 'is young lordship, when the beak at the Old Byeley sent Melmoth down for a stretch. Never wrote to 'im in the clink, neither. So Lord Alf's conscience 'as bin troublin' 'im, givin' 'im socks, bet yer life. An' now 'e reckons it's safe to meet Melmoth again, on the quiet, an' see 'ow 'e's made out."

" 'E'll get a bleedin' shock when 'e sees that, Titch!"

Shadows moved on a wall in the room across the canal there. Liquour glugged audibly from a bottle.

"It's like the Marquess told us, Josser. 'E's suspicious because 'e's 'eard 'is fancy son's rented a villa—Villa Giudice at Posilippo, on the B'y o' Nyples—an' the Marquess reckons Lord Alf may take Melmoth there on the sly. An' you know what the Marquess told you when 'e 'anded you that thahsand pahnds you got in yer baggage there—"

" 'Get Melmoth for me, Josser,' the old bleeder said, Twitch. 'I don't care 'ow you do it, or 'oo you 'ave to bribe, or 'ow much, but

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fix Melmoth for keeps, Josser!' The Marquess an' 'is bloody *Rules o' the Prize Ring,* eh, Titch?"

"Gentry's different, Josser. They makes their own rules as they goes along. No skin off our nose. To-morrow we fixes Melmoth, and it don't cost a blind farthing. All I does is watch my chance to walk up to 'im to-morrow an' ask the time, an' say wot a nice bit o' weather we're 'avin'. Then I walks off to the police station where them Venice coppers lolls around in admirals' 'ats an' white gloves. An' I tells 'em, indignant-like, I'm a innocent young tourist passin' through which a grown man 'as just made remarks to that interpretations could be put on."

"You crafty little baby-faced, Titch!"

"So then I tells 'em, Josser, that I recognises the grown man as an old lag wot was 'ad up at the Old Byeley. An' I tells 'em 'is real name. That'll do it, Josser. *They'll* 'ave 'eard of 'im. 'Oo 'asn't? An' it'll be a case o'—'Give a dog a bad name,' see?"

"They'll run 'im in on the spot, Titch!"

"What's more, Josser, the British Consul ain't goin' to stir 'imself overmuch for an old lag. So Mr. Alias Bloomin' Melmoth'll be in the same fix as them Venice blokes in old-fashioned times 'ere. They got frogsmarched across that there Bridge o' Sighs an' flung in the dungeons of The Dodger's Palace—an' that was the last anyone ever 'eard of 'em!"

"Blimey, Titch, the Marquess'll laugh 'is bleedin' 'ead off! All right, we'll do it to-morrer. Now, go on, get out o' my room an' rest yer brains. I needs my sleep."

Raffles murmured in my ear, "While he's settling down to repose, Bunny, let's see if we can get a drink somewhere to wash a bad taste out of our mouths."

We found, not far off, a small *caffè* that was on the point of closing. The proprietor served us reluctantly with a couple of glasses of rough Tuscan wine from a barrel, and Raffles asked for a few toothpicks. Puzzled, I watched him arrange four of them thus:

"What does that signify?" I asked, with a frown.

"It signifies," Raffles said, "the position of the barges now lying in line, each moored fore and aft, against the sidewalk side of the canal back there. Now, if the fore end of the second barge were unmoored and given a push, it would float out to this position."

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He revised the position of the second toothpick to:

"The barge," he said, "would then be aslant across the canal, and its fore end, I fancy, would just about be touching the wall of the *Pensione* almost exactly under Josser's window."

"A bridge!" I exclaimed.

"A pontoon bridge," Raffles agreed, "a Bridge of Sighs for the Mad Marquess, because it'll cost him the thousand pounds he entrusted to Josser in a bad cause, and enable us to divert the money to the worthier cause of laying a foundation on which to build Dinah's dowry."

When we returned to the canal that flanked the side of the *Pensione*, snores sounded audibly from the wide-open window and shutters of Josser's room. Raffles untied from its mooring-ring the rope at the fore end of the second barge. We stepped down into a slime of rotting vegetable matter on the floorboards of the barge. There we found the heavy, slippery bargepole. With this we thrust hard against the sidewalk parapet. The barge, still secured at its stern, swung out gently over the stagnant canal and knocked against the wall under Josser's window.

Raffles leaped up, gripped the sill, pulled himself higher, and, silent as a leopard, vanished into the darkness of the room.

I stood holding the bargepole jammed down into the mud of the canal bottom, to keep the barge in position. Sweat poured down inside my evening dress. Mingling with the snores from the open window just above my head, another sound became audible—the throbbing of an approaching *vaporetto,* a steam-launch. I peered along the dark canal to where, at its further end, about a hundred yards off, it debouched into a moonlit cross-canal.

The throbbing grew louder, then slower. I could hear the water churned by the screws. Would the launch turn into this canal blocked by the barge? My heart pounded. Suddenly Raffles dropped down beside me into the barge.

"Don't move," I whispered. "Look there!"

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The *vaporetto* had steamed into view, there in the moonlight of the cross-canal. It was a police patrol launch. The epaulettes and cocked hats of two policemen were clearly visible as, their launch scarcely moving, they peered toward us along the dark canal.

Clearly, a voice reached us: "Niente! Andiamo!"

Smoke belched from the launch's short stack, the screws churned the water, the launch moved on, and its purposeful throbbing died away.

We tied up the barge in its original position and, leaving Josser's snores behind us, made our retreat quickly along the footwalks that edged the jigsaw of waterways. Not until we came out of the Piazza San Marco did I ask Raffles if he had found the money in Josser's baggage.

"It's in hundred-pound notes, Bunny. It's in my pocket." He stopped dead. "There's Melmoth!"

The pigeons had gone to roost. Nothing moved on the moonlit expanse of the great square slanted across by the shadow of the Campanile, but a few figures still sat at the sidewalk tables of the Caffé Forian in the arcade. Among those sleepless beings, the figure of Melmoth, alone at a table, brooded over his absinthe.

"The folly of the man!" I muttered. "How can he have brought himself to make a rendezvous again with the young lordship who wrecked him?"

"Mel*moth*," Raffles said dryly. "An apt alias, Bunny. The moth with scorched wings can't help scorching them again—even to death—in the same flame."

"He's forgotten the lines he himself wrote," I said, "in the ballad composed behind prison bars: '*For who can tell To what red hell His immortal soul shall go?*' "

"Bunny," Raffles said, "I don't know whether it's possible to help a man who's lost the will to help himself. But one can try. Go on to our hotel. I'll see you when I see you."

Leaving me in the moonlight, he walked on and passed under the gas-globes of the arcade to join Melmoth the Wanderer.

Broad daylight filled my room at the hotel when Raffles woke me. He had bathed, and changed from evening dress to a suit of light grey flannel, with a pearl in his cravat, but his keen face had a haggard look.

"It's six A.M., Bunny," he said, offering me a Sullivan from his cigarette-case. "Melmoth's gone. I saw him off, an hour ago, on

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the first train out across the causeway. He's not going to keep his rendezvous to-day, or any other rendezvous ever, I think, with the young milord. I gather that Melmoth has just one steady, wise, compassionate friend—a man called Robbie—who's at Taormina in Sicily. I've given Melmoth two hundred pounds—all he would accept from me, though he doesn't know it's the Mad Marquess' money—and he's on his way now to Taormina."

"What about Titch and Josser?"

"No sign of 'em at the station, Bunny. Still snoring in the *Pensione* I imagine. When they wake up to find they've lost the Marquess' thousand pounds, then find they've lost track of Melmoth as well, I doubt if they'll go to the police—who'd be suspicious about how a precious pair like that got their hooks on a thousand pounds in the first place. No, I fancy they'll be catching the train to-day for Paris and London, which leaves at four this afternoon. To be sure they go, we'll take Dinah for a gondola ride, and I'll have a quiet word with Salvatore to see to it we're in the vicinity of the station about four this afternoon."

The clocks of Venice were nearing that hour when our gondola, lazily propelled by Salvatore's huge oar, drifted us into view of the broad, water-lapped steps to the arched entrance of the glass-roofed station.

From gondolas and from an awninged *vaporetto,* a public Grand Canal steam-launch, travellers were disembarking and going up the steps into the station. Among them trudged, bad-temperedly humping their carpet-bags, Titch and Josser.

Evidently a train had just come in, for newly-arrived travellers were emerging from the station.

"Oh, look!" said Dinah idly, as she reclined on our gondola cushions in the shade of her pretty parasol. "What an attractive young man!"

Following the glance of her cool grey eyes, I saw that the young man in question, accompanied by a porter burdened with expensive luggage, had just emerged from the station. Of graceful build, immaculate in white flannels and a pink blazer, a boater jauntily tilted on longish hair almost as fair as Dinah's, he stood at the head of the steps, tapping a malacca cane languidly on his palm as he cast patrician glances over the throng of travellers, as though he expected somebody to be awaiting his arrival.

"He looks like a young Adonis," said Dinah, "just, as I imagine, Lord Alfred must look."

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It was an instant before, in the gently rocking gondola fifty yards out from the station, the impact of her remark struck me. I stared at her.

Raffles said, very evenly, "Lord Alfred, Dinah?"

"Mr. Melmoth's ex-friend," Dinah said. "Poor Mr. Melmoth, I know his *real* name and why he changed it."

"Indeed?" said Raffles.

"But of course," said Dinah. "Because when we met Mr. Melmoth with Mr. Beardsley in that Paris *café*, I had a feeling that Mr. Melmoth looked rather like the poor convict, with the broad arrows on him, that I caught a glimpse of in that iron-barred cage at the Waxworks. So I read all about him, and his green carnation, in the catalogue later on."

"But, Dinah," I blurted, "*I* had the catalogue."

"Yes, Bunny," she said, "I noticed it in the side pocket of your suit as we were talking to Mr. Melmoth and Mr. Beardsley."

From the shade of her pretty parasol, as she reclined on the gondola cushions, she smiled at us with indulgent composure.

"So I *stole* it," said Dinah Raffles.

Appalled, I glanced at Raffles. And I knew then, very surely, he would see to it that his sister changed her surname as soon as he had amassed her dowry. For A. J. Raffles was looking up speculatively at where, high on the cathedral roof not far off, the only horses in Venice pranced nobly against the blue of the sky —the priceless golden horses of St. Mark's.

Author's Note

Although various biographers of Lord Alfred Douglas and Mr. Oscar Wilde (self-styled, in exile, Sebastian Melmoth) mention an arrangement between those gentlemen for a joint sojourn at the Villa Giudice, Posilippo, no explanation for the abandonment of that arrangement has been forthcoming until Mr. Manders' account of the above adventure was made available by the authorities.

Lord Alfred is known to have been present, however, when, ultimately, Mr. Wilde's remains were interred in the Père Lachaise Cemetery, Paris, under

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the epitaph he had composed for himself:

And alien tears will fill for him
Pity's long-broken urn . . .

Young Mr. Aubrey Beardsley, whose unique talent illustrated so much of the best work from Mr. Wilde's pen, died at Mentone at the age of 24, shortly after the meeting described in Mr. Manders' narrative.

If there exists any account by Mr. Manders of an attempt by his friend A. J. Raffles to make off with the golden horses of St. Mark's, it remains among the many private writings of Mr. Manders which, following their seizure at his Mount Street flat by Scotland Yard, the authorities have not yet deemed it prudent to release.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Mr. Strang story by

WILLIAM BRITTAIN

Mr. Leonard Strang, the gnomelike old science teacher at Aldershot High School, is a trained observer. He sees everything—not only what is there but what is not there. And when the clue in a murder case proved to be something missing, Mr. Strang saw that too—as clearly as if the clue were not missing at all . . .

MR. STRANG AND THE CAT LADY

by WILLIAM BRITTAIN

It was a Wednesday in late fall. The fifth period was almost over, and Mr. Strang stood at the window of his classroom. The crumbs of the sandwich that had been his lunch lay unnoticed on his jacket lapels and rumpled necktie. He was speculating on how many more days it would be before the maple trees in front of Aldershot High School would be completely bare of leaves when he felt a tugging at the far reaches of his consciousness. Something odd had happened. Or rather, something had *not* happened, and that was equally odd. But it was several minutes before he realized what it was.

Miss Pinderek had not passed the school on her daily walk to the grocery store.

Until 17 years before, Agnes Pinderek had been a history teacher at Aldershot High. Then, at the age of 72, she had retired, with a minimum of fuss and fanfare, to her little cottage just around the corner. Few of the present staff even knew Miss Pinderek existed. But Mr. Strang knew, remembering the advice and encouragement she had showered on him long ago when he was only a young teacher just out of normal school. Mr. Strang ran gnarled fingers through his sparse crop of gray hair, realizing that by now Agnes Pinderek must be almost 90.

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And yet every day at 12:15, in spite of her age, Agnes Pinderek walked by the school on her way to the grocery store three blocks away. And every day at one o'clock she returned, head erect and spine ramrod-straight, clutching a small paper bag as if daring someone to try and take it from her. Rain, snow, sleet, and hail did not deter her. Through them all she marched at her appointed times. In retirement she was the same as she had been in the classroom—proud, punctual, self-sufficient.

But on this day Miss Pinderek had not appeared.

Mr. Strang decided to pay her a visit as soon as school was over. He knew this would not please her. While she sometimes returned to school to see old friends, she was adamant about refusing to allow visitors to her home. "I'm an old lady, Leonard," she had told Mr. Strang on one occasion when he'd requested the privilege of making a call. "I've worked hard for my privacy, and now I intend to have it. Besides, I've spent so long in school that you might not recognize me away from it. I'd love to chat with you in your classroom after school, but my home is not open to visitors."

And that had been that.

Still, Miss Pinderek might be ill. Perhaps too ill to summon help. And he might not need to even enter the house. If he shouted through the door at her and received an answer, that would be enough to reassure him.

For the rest of the day Mr. Strang's classes came and went. Chemistry, general science, biology. And through them all the old teacher couldn't get Miss Pinderek out of his mind. Finally the school day ended. Mr. Strang placed a sign on his door canceling the meeting of the Science Club, took his keyring to the main office, and left the building just as the last of the buses was pulling out of the driveway.

Miss Pinderek's tiny front yard was overrun with ivy which not only choked out the weeds but climbed the clapboard sides of the house, partially obscuring the fact that the structure was badly in need of paint.

Mr. Strang pressed the doorbell. He heard no chime or buzz from inside the house. Finally he rapped loudly on the front door, his knuckles avoiding the panes of glass, three of which were cracked, while the fourth was missing, the opening blocked by a piece of cardboard.

No answer. He knocked again. Then he rattled the doorknob. The door creaked

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open a scant twelve inches and then struck against something.

The teacher pushed his way through the opening. He found himself standing between two towering piles of boxes, one of which had kept the door from opening fully. Beyond the boxes piles of ancient magazines and newspapers filled the entryway, leaving only a narrow passage along which the teacher walked.

"Agnes! Agnes Pinderek!" he called. The piles of debris muffled the sound of his voice. There was no answer except for a faint rustling which told of mice scampering for safety. Finally he reached the living room.

It was there he found the body of Agnes Pinderek.

Even as he absorbed the shock of finding the dead woman, Mr. Strang's brain was considering what must have happened. She had died painfully, horribly. The threadbare rug was pulled and twisted where her body had thrashed about on the floor, and an old brass lamp had been toppled, breaking its white glass bowl. Several of the piles of books about the room had been dragged down, and a copy of Charles Dickens' *Bleak House* was lying beneath the body. The old lady's long fingernails had pierced the palms of her hands, silent testimony to the agony she had suffered.

Someone had to be notified. Mr. Strang looked around for a telephone and found none. He walked toward the rear of the house, shivering uncontrollably. What kind of illness or injury could have caused such suffering?

He found the box of rat poison on the shelf in the kitchen. It was almost empty. In the sink were two white china cups and a teaspoon, all washed clean.

Pale and queasy, Mr. Strang left the house and hurried to the telephone booth on the corner in front of the school. From there he called the Aldershot police and asked to speak to Detective Sergeant Paul Roberts.

As if by magic a crowd collected in front of Miss Pinderek's house shortly after the arrival of the first police car. A pair of uniformed patrolmen, beefy and poker-faced, was stationed at the front door, and others were keeping the onlookers behind hastily erected barricades. Official-looking men carrying brief cases, cameras, and bags of investigative equipment moved back and forth between the house and the line of cars parked at the curb. Miss Pinderek's body, covered with a

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sheet, was brought out on a stretcher to be taken to the morgue for examination.

Paul Roberts came out of the house and beckoned to the teacher. Mr. Strang followed the bulky detective through the crowd until they reached a car at the curb. As Mr. Strang opened the door and got in on the passenger's side, he couldn't help thinking how much Agnes Pinderek would have disapproved of all this fuss being made over her. Proudly independent for nearly 90 years, she was receiving in death the attention she had spurned while alive.

Roberts sprawled onto the seat beside him and braced a clipboard against the steering wheel. "Do you have any idea who did it?" asked the teacher.

"I dunno. She didn't seem to have any enemies, according to the neighbors. She lived a pretty lonely existence, as far as we can make out."

Mr. Strang removed his black-rimmed glasses and rubbed at his eyes. "Paul," he said, "are you sure it's murder? After all, Agnes—Miss Pinderek—was an old lady. Couldn't she have just died of natural causes?"

Roberts shook his head. "The police surgeon said it was poison. Arsenic—all the classic symptoms. Apparently she died some time yesterday afternoon."

"The rat poison?"

Roberts shifted the holstered pistol at his hip to a more comfortable position. "That's how we figure it," he said. "A couple of spoonfuls of that stuff would contain enough arsenic to kill a horse. We tried to lift prints from the box, but the cardboard was so wrinkled and greasy we couldn't get anything worthwhile. The cups and the spoon in the sink were clean too."

"Two cups," said Mr. Strang. "So there probably was a visitor. But up to now Agnes has never allowed a visitor in her house. Not even her best friends."

"Yeah," said Roberts musingly. "Well, she had one yesterday, all right."

"Any idea who it could have been?"

"We've got a pretty good—" Suddenly Roberts clamped his mouth shut and looked at the teacher, shaking his head. "Always want to play detective, don't you—?" he grinned. "Suppose I ask the questions and you give the answers."

"All right, Paul. Fire away."

"Okay. Since Miss Pinderek didn't allow visitors, how come you picked today to come calling?"

The teacher told Roberts about Miss Pinderek's daily

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trips to the grocery store.

"But today she didn't go, eh?"

Mr. Strang nodded. "For the first time I know of in years. I came over thinking something might be wrong. But I never suspected—"

"Yeah." Roberts slapped the clipboard onto the seat next to him. He turned the key in the ignition, and the starter whirred. "Let's take a ride. It's not much of a lead, but I'd better follow it up."

"Follow what up, Paul?"

"The grocery store. That would be the supermarket on Ripley Street. It's the only one in walking distance from here. I'd like to know what Miss Pinderek usually bought there every day."

In the parking lot Mr. Strang waited in the car while Roberts entered the supermarket. He was gone less than fifteen minutes. Returning, he opened the door, sat down, and shrugged dejectedly. "Catfood," he rumbled, frowning into the rear-view mirror. "Damn!"

"What's the matter?"

"The clerks remember her, all right," Roberts replied. "One or two of the older ones used to have her for a teacher. Every day she'd come into the store at about twelve thirty. She'd pick up a few vegetables, maybe, or a loaf of old bread on sale. But there's one thing she bought every day. A can of Tabby-Yum catfood—tuna flavor."

"Well, that's innocent enough," said the teacher. "I doubt anyone would murder Miss Pinderek just because she kept a cat."

"Okay. But tell me this. What happened to the cat?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"About thirty men have gone through Miss Pinderek's house with a fine-tooth comb. There was no sign of any cat."

"Perhaps it ran away."

Roberts shook his head. "No way, Mr. Strang. I know cats. We've got two of 'em at home. They tend to hang around wherever they've been used to getting chow."

"Maybe it's at a neighbor's house."

Roberts rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Could be. But you'd think we'd have found a food dish or a litter box —something to show a cat lived there."

"Paul, are you saying the murderer took the cat?"

"That would explain why it's missing, at least. If the killer was after the cat and if Miss Pinderek caught him—"

"What then?" Mr. Strang shook his head. "I doubt she'd have offered him a cup of coffee or tea."

"Yeah, that's true. But how's this? Miss Pinderek's visitor is

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let in. She offers him something—tea, probably. The visitor spikes Miss Pinderek's tea with the rat poison. She drinks it. She dies. Then the killer takes away the cat and all its equipment. How does that grab you?"

"Frankly, Paul," said Mr. Strang, "it leaves me with a good many questions unanswered. Why, for example, did Agnes allow this one person in when she'd kept all visitors out for years? And why did the killer choose a slow-acting poison like arsenic? And why was the cat taken away at all?"

"This is a weird one, all right," said Roberts with a shake of his head. "The whole thing's crazy. No motive. The killer steals a cat. If we're dealing with a maniac, he's going to be devilishly hard to locate."

"But you do have another lead, don't you, Paul?" Mr. Strang regarded the detective with an owlish stare.

"Like I said, that's police business," said Roberts, starting the car. "You stick to schoolteaching. C'mon, I'll take you home."

It was two days later, on Friday evening, that Roberts called on Mr. Strang at the teacher's room in Mrs. Mackey's boardinghouse. Mr. Strang offered the detective a chair, which was accepted, and a brandy, which was refused.

"I gotta have your help on the Pinderek case," said the detective reluctantly.

"Why, I wouldn't think of meddling in police business," said Mr. Strang, a smile playing across his lips. "I'm a schoolteacher, remember?"

"Okay, so I shot my mouth off," said Roberts. "But you've got to help me on this one. Seems like everybody in Aldershot knew of Miss Pinderek. They've been demanding action on her murder. The chief's been catching all kinds of flak, and he's dropped the whole thing in my lap. I've got twenty-four hours to come up with an answer."

"But how can I help?" Mr. Strang asked.

"Do you know a kid in the high school named Gary Eklund?"

Mr. Strang stared intently at Roberts. "What's Gary got to do with this?"

"I just want to talk to him, that's all. But if I drop around at his house by myself, the whole family's going to start getting excited—a detective questioning their son and all that. But I understand Gary's in one of your classes."

Mr. Strang nodded.

"Well, that's the answer then," said Roberts. "You come with me. You're his teacher.

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He'll be more open with you."

Mr. Strang shook his head. "Gary lives with his mother, Paul. The father's been dead less than a year. I'm not about to use my position as Gary's teacher to make him say things he wouldn't talk to a detective about. You'll have to do your own dirty work."

"Okay." Roberts stood up and jammed his hat onto his head. "I thought it would be easier this way, that's all. I guess I'll just have to pull the kid in for questioning."

He was almost to the door when Mr. Strang stopped him. "Paul, wait. You must have some evidence against Gary. Tell me what it is. If what you've got is legitimate—if you're not just going on a fishing expedition—I'll help you. I'm afraid of how Gary's mother would react to his being arrested."

Roberts moved back into the room and sat down again. "Evidence," he said. "Yeah, we got evidence. Apparently Gary Eklund was the visitor Miss Pinderek had on the day she died."

From a coat pocket he took out a notebook. Opening it, he removed a small piece of paper. "This," he said, "is a receipt form for the school edition of the *Morning Record* newspaper. According to what we've found out, young Eklund handles the delivery of those papers in Aldershot High School. Is that right?"

"Yes. I take it myself. Seven cents a day, thirty-five cents per week. A special school rate. Gary earns a few dollars by distributing the papers to the classroom."

"But he's not supposed to deliver anywhere except in school," said Roberts. "Correct?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then how come this receipt was found in Miss Pinderek's house? It was under the rug next to the body. It's dated the day of the murder—last Tuesday. It's got Miss Pinderek's name on it, Mr. Strang. It's made out for thirty-five cents. And the words *Cancel Subscription* are written across the front of it. Last but not least, Gary Eklund's signature is at the bottom."

"Then Gary was in that house the day Agnes was murdered," said the teacher.

"That's right. And there's another thing. Have you taken a look at Gary's left hand in the last couple of days?"

"No, I—"

"According to his friends, Mr. Strang, there are scratches across the back of it. Scratches that look like they were made by a cat's claws."

The teacher sat down limply. "But Gary's only a boy."

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"I know that, Mr. Strang. That's why I want you to be the one to ask him about the receipt and the scratches. Hell, maybe it was an accident. I dunno. I'm not out to frame the kid. I just want to find out what really happened in Miss Pinderek's house last Tuesday."

"When do you want to see Gary, Paul?"

"Right away."

"I'll get my coat."

It was nearly eight o'clock when Roberts and Mr. Strang arrived at the Eklund house, a small shingled bungalow at the far end of town. Mr. Strang rapped at the door, while Roberts hung back in the shadows.

The door was opened by a frail woman with graying hair, wearing a faded housedress. "Why, Mr. Strang," she smiled, swinging the door wide. "What a pleasure to see you. Won't you come in?"

Mr. Strang entered the house, followed by Roberts. "We'd like to talk to Gary for a few minutes, if you don't mind, Mrs. Eklund. This man is a detective with the Aldershot —"

There was a sudden scurrying at the rear of the house and the sound of a door opening and closing. Immediately Roberts reopened the front door and raced out into the darkness.

For a moment there was only the slap of footsteps circling the house. Then a scuffling sound, followed by a shrill yell. Finally Roberts' loud voice echoed through the evening stillness.

"Get up, Gary, and come inside. I don't want to hurt you."

Roberts entered, almost carrying a youth wearing blue jeans, a flannel shirt, and once-white sneakers.

"Gary! Mr. Strang!" gasped Mrs. Eklund, her eyes wide and the palms of her hands pressed against her face. "What's happening? I don't understand."

"Sit down, Mrs. Eklund," said the teacher softly. "There really isn't any easy way to say this. You see, Detective Roberts believes Gary knows something about Agnes Pinderek's death last Tuesday."

"But—but that's impossible, Mr. Strang. Gary wouldn't—"

"Tell me something, Gary," said Roberts, staring down at the boy. "Did you visit Miss Pinderek at any time last Tuesday?"

"I don't have to talk to you." Gary turned uncertainly to the teacher. "Do I, Mr. Strang?"

After a glance at Roberts, Mr. Strang shook his head. He knelt beside the boy's chair.

"Gary," he said softly, "I'm on your side. I don't think you did anything wrong."

Slowly Gary raised his eyes toward his mother's worried

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face. "But I did," he whimpered. "I did do something wrong."

There was a gasp from Mrs. Eklund. But Mr. Strang went on as if he hadn't heard. "What was it, Gary? What did you do that was wrong?"

"It was on Tuesday. I sneaked out of school during my study hall the last period. You see, Miss Pinderek asked me to come to her house. And old Mrs. Lewis never takes attendance in study hall anyway. So I thought nobody would know."

"Why did Miss Pinderek want to see you?" asked Mr. Strang. Behind him, Gary's mother had gripped Roberts' sleeve, and her thin body was trembling.

"She takes the paper, Mr. Strang. Oh, I know I'm only supposed to deliver to people in school. But one day last year I saw her in the hall and she said she'd like to take the paper if it was at all possible. She seemed real nice, and it was no trouble at all to go over there before homeroom, so I did it. I guess when they find out about this, they'll take my job away."

"So you've been delivering the paper to Miss Pinderek every day, is that it? That's the 'something wrong' you were talking about? And she asked you to stop by on Tuesday so she could pay you?"

"Yes, sir. She owed me for the week. It was then she said she wanted to cancel the subscription. I made out a receipt just so I'd have a carbon copy for the circulation manager."

"Did you go *into* the house, Gary?"

The boy nodded. "It was the first time she ever let me inside. It was kind of spooky in there, but she made me a cup of tea. I don't like tea, but she was so nice I drank it so I wouldn't hurt her feelings."

"Did you see a box of rat poison?" asked the teacher.

Gary stared at him blankly. "I don't know anything about rat poison, Mr. Strang. After we'd had our tea, Miss Pinderek paid me, and I left."

"Is that all, Gary?"

"That's all. Honest. The next day I was leaving school when I saw all the police cars by Miss Pinderek's house. When I got home I heard on the radio that she'd been—been—"

Roberts tapped Mr. Strang on the shoulder. "That story's all fine and dandy," he said. "But he still hasn't said anything about how the cat put those scratches on the back of his hand."

Gary considered his left hand as if seeing the scratches for the first time. "What's he talking about?" he asked Mr. Strang.

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"The cat," Roberts said. "What did you do with the cat?"

"Cat? What cat, Mr. Strang?"

"Gary," said the teacher, rising stiffly to his feet. "Mr. Roberts wants to know how you got those scratches on your hand. Was it Miss Pinderek's cat that did it?"

"It wasn't any cat," said Gary. "It was a girl. We were down at the Malt Shop after school on Wednesday. In a booth. I was kind of—you know. Playing around a little. She got mad. So she dug her fingernails into my hand. I pulled it away, and that's how I got scratched."

"Holy Moses on a bicycle!" Paul Roberts shook his head in disgust. "Where did you dream up that fairy tale? If a girl did that, what's her name?"

Tight-lipped, Gary stared at the floor, shaking his head.

"I dunno," said Roberts. "There's no way to get a straight answer out of the kid. And we haven't gotten a single bit of information about the cat. Or the rat poison. Or—"

The teacher sank into a chair, staring at the opposite wall. "Rat poison," he murmured. "Rat poison. That's got to be it."

"Got to be what, Mr. Strang?" asked the detective.

The teacher rose and faced the little group before him. From a jacket pocket he took his glasses and began polishing them on his necktie. "Paul," he said, "it's pretty obvious that you think Gary is lying."

"Sure he's lying. How do you explain his taking off as soon as he found out I was a detective? And what about that business of the girl? He won't give her name. Why? Because there wasn't any girl. It was a cat, I tell you. Look, I'll grant I haven't figured out his motive yet. But of all the crazy yarns—"

"Paul, I want you to do something for me. It won't be easy for you, but try your best."

"Sure, Mr. Strang. Anything to get to the bottom of this. What is it?"

"I want you to assume for a short while that Gary is telling the absolute truth, that he has left out nothing of importance."

Roberts stared at the teacher in amazement. "Oh, come on!" he barked in an outraged tone.

"Now if Gary told the truth," Mr. Strang went on calmly, "then he paid Miss Pinderek a visit but left her alive and well. A day later, however, he finds out she's been murdered. As perhaps the only visitor Miss Pinderek has had in years, he realizes he'll be the Number One suspect. And then this evening a detective comes to his home. Wouldn't that explain his sudden flight out the

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back door? Gary tried to escape not because he was guilty but because he was afraid you thought he was."

"Well, yeah, maybe. But what about that business of the girl scratching him? That's a lot of—"

Mr. Strang held up a warning finger. "We're assuming Gary's telling the truth, remember? Paul, when you were young, did you ever get fresh with a girl?"

The answer came grudgingly. "Yeah. Couple of times. One of 'em took a good sock at me."

"Would you have been willing to discuss those times with adults if they'd asked you?"

"Not on your life. I mean—"

"So much for Gary's silence concerning the girl," the teacher went on. "Yes, Gary's afraid. He's afraid he'll lose his paper route because he was doing an old lady a favor by making a delivery outside of school. He's afraid he'll be disciplined for cutting school during a study hall. He's afraid you suspect him of a murder he never committed. But still, I'm convinced he's telling the truth. He went to see Miss Pinderek on Tuesday afternoon. He collected what was owed, gave her a receipt, then left. That's all."

"And what about the cat?" Roberts asked.

"Ah, yes, the elusive cat. I'm glad you brought that up, Paul, because that's what convinced me Gary was *not* lying."

"Where is it, then?" the detective demanded.

"The cat, which you thought made the scratches on Gary's hand, and which the killer supposedly did away with, can't be found for the simple reason that it never existed. The fleeing feline is a figment of the imagination, Paul. A phantom."

"But there had to be a cat!" Roberts exclaimed.

"Why, Paul? Why?" Mr. Strang continued relentlessly. "There was no sign of one. No bedding, no food dish—nothing. And once we eliminate the nonexistent cat from our thinking, Agnes Pinderek's death is much easier to explain."

"Now, hang on, Mr. Strang." Roberts held up a hand like a student during a class discussion, then furiously jerked it down again. "We know Agnes Pinderek bought a can of Tabby-Yum every day. So how can you say she never owned a cat?"

"Because of the rat poison. Paul, why would a woman who kept a cat—a cat big and healthy enough to consume a can of catfood every day—need rat poison? And yet the box of poison was old and stained, and nearly empty. Now, not even

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the most determined poisoner would need an entire box of rat poison. Clearly the poison was there because Miss Pinderek was plagued with rats. But whoever heard of rat poison being necessary in a home where there's a healthy cat? Therefore, Miss Pinderek did not own a cat."

There was a long silence. From deep in Roberts' throat came a noise like a clogged drain. "Why, I—I—" he stammered.

But Mr. Strang pressed on. "Furthermore, when I first entered Miss Pinderek's house I distinctly heard mice playing among those boxes. Surely mice wouldn't run about so freely if there was a cat in the house."

"No cat," said Roberts slowly. "Okay, Gary seems to have been telling the truth. But if Miss Pinderek was all right when he left the house, what did happen? As far as we know, she had no other visitors. Who could have killed her?"

"The only person possible. Agnes herself."

"Suicide?" Roberts whispered the word. "But why?"

"Paul, I knew Miss Pinderek for several years before her retirement. She was a fiercely independent woman. She told me many times of her dread of one day being forced to accept charity."

Mr. Strang removed a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose loudly. "Seventeen years ago Agnes Pinderek retired. She'd made a few investments and felt that with the income from those plus what she got from the retirement fund, she'd be able to get along.

"Now, whether the investments went bad or rising prices were more than her fixed income could take, I don't know. But look at her house. It's rundown in a way she'd never have allowed if she'd had the money for its upkeep. I'd also imagine you'll find it's mortgaged to the hilt. She took to saving everything and anything that might one day be turned into cash. She bought stale bread, and even got the newspaper at school rates to save a few cents a week.

"Paul, the woman was a pauper. But still she wished to maintain her independence. Therefore she allowed herself no visitors who might see how badly off she was and take pity on her. Pity was the one emotion she couldn't tolerate when it was directed at her.

"And then one day she realized she could go on no longer. It became impossible for her to support herself. Accept charity? Never—not Agnes Pinderek. But there was

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another way. A solution that a proud woman of ninety might have found quite acceptable. Certainly from her point of view much more honorable than the indignity she would have suffered from accepting public assistance.

"But first her affairs had to be put in order. And that involved paying all her debts —including what she owed Gary. She invited him inside. We can only speculate on why she did this after having kept visitors away for so many years. But he was, after all, the last human she'd ever see. And she remembered to cancel the newspaper. At her death she would leave no loose ends behind.

"Once Gary had left the house, Agnes made a second cup of tea in the same cup she'd first used and mixed in the arsenic. Being tasteless, it was easily swallowed. Then she washed the cups and spoon, not to conceal evidence, but simply from force of habit. The cramps and stomach pains didn't come until later."

Mr. Strang rubbed one hand across his eyes, which were glistening wetly.

"You've drawn a helluva lot of conclusions from a box of rat poison and a missing cat," said Roberts. "How can you be so sure that—"

A tear ran down Mr. Strang's cheek.

"It really had to happen the way you said, didn't it?" Roberts murmured softly. "I'll run a check on Miss Pinderek's finances to make sure, but —well, how else could it have been?"

With one hand he rubbed at the back of his neck. "But I still don't understand about the cat-food."

"Tabby-Yum costs about one-third the price of a can of tunafish," said Mr. Strang. "For the past few years it was about the only thing keeping Miss Pinderek alive."

"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 424th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a "challenge to the reader" story: can you spot the essential clue?

The author, Alfred Kuan, was 42 when he submitted his first story. He is single and lives "in a small house in the country where he can see the stars and where his Shetland sheepdog can bark all she wants to." Mr. Kuan has been a change control analyst; an "area correspondent covering courts, city hall, town affairs, and gruesome accidents," a reporter and photographer, and at present he is assistant night editor on a daily newspaper. He likes, among other things, to read, walk, backpack, and climb mountains; he is an amateur geologist and botanist, a "card-carrying" birdwatcher, and is now "learning the fine art of fly-fishing" . . .

A MATTER OF PHYSICS

by ALFRED KUAN

Navy missiles are meant to be fired at sea, but their first test firings are done ashore, where high-speed movie cameras can surround them. So it was a busy forenoon watch for CPO Grady and the young lieutenant as they patrolled the 18-mile boundary fence, checking the guards and the electronic alarm posts.

There had been a couple of scares. Once the helicopter buzzing overhead had taken off in the direction of an alarm in sector 7A and had reported back in a minute that it was only a bunch of steers from the Ruskin ranch wandering again.

Then, about 9:00 A.M., a carload of kids was leaning on the fence watching their battered car steaming on the public road.

"Hi, men. Having some trouble?" Grady called through the fence as he pulled the jeep up alongside.

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"Naw, we're not havin' no trouble. It's the car what's havin' trouble," the brightest-looking of the group replied.

"Well, now, I think I can fix you up. Tow you into town, no charge."

A broad smile spread across the youth's face, and Grady radioed one of the base tow trucks.

"I don't know if there's any provision in the Navy's budget for towing civilian cars a round trip of fifty-two miles," the lieutenant remarked mildly when the jeep was once more speeding down the dusty boundary road.

Grady gripped the wheel and watched the road as he said calmly, "I've been in this man's Navy a long time, and there's one thing I've learned. You've got to use your head. It isn't all in books, like some people think it is."

"I know," the lieutenant said. "We've had this talk before, but there's more to it than that, I think. I still say that general knowledge can be more important than knowing how to manage peop— what's that over there?"

"What?"

"A flash."

Grady skidded the jeep to a stop and jerked the binoculars out of the case as the lieutenant pointed.

"It's a surveyor on the Ruskin place. They're probably going to sell it now that Ruskin's dead."

The lieutenant shifted in his seat. "I don't like it. Call the 'copter."

"Yessir," Grady drawled, and did.

Three minutes later they were dropping down on the surveyor and his rodman, the first a heavy-set man in his forties, neatly dressed in field engineer's clothing, and the second a denimed young man.

The surveyor covered the lenses of his tripod-mounted instrument as the 'copter landed in a cloud of dust.

"To what do I owe the honor?" the surveyor asked as Grady and the lieutenant walked up.

"Well, sir, it's like this," Grady said. "That's a big Navy base over there and we have to check out anything movin' around these parts. No offense intended, but I've got to ask you what's your business here."

"No offense taken," the surveyor replied. "I'm a surveyor, and I'm surveying this property at the request of the Ruskin estate. I trust my doing so is not causing you any inconvenience." He took off his heavy, steel-framed glasses and wiped them vigorously with a white handkerchief.

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"That's an unsual transit you have there," the lieutenant said. "Very large and all sealed up."

"It's a dustproof transit, actually. The ordinary open transit collects too much dirt here in the West, and grit gets into the bearings."

"Yes," the lieutenant said politely, and drew his .45. "Call the State Police, the F.B.I., and base security," he told Grady. "I think we've caught a spy."

"What I don't get, Lieutenant, sir, is how you knew," Grady said after the authorities had arrived and the "transit" had been taken apart.

"How I knew it was a high-speed movie camera to photograph the launch? I didn't, really. I just knew our friend there was no surveyor. It was his eyeglasses."

Grady stared. "I've seen surveyors wearing glasses before."

"But a transit has a compass in it. It's basic to the instrument. If it doesn't have a compass, it's not a transit. It's a big compass, a precise compass, and a compass is a magnet.

"A magnet is affected by iron and steel. He couldn't have looked into the eyepiece of that so-called transit without throwing the readings out of whack—"

"—because he was wearing steel eyeglasses," Grady finished, grinning and clapping the steering wheel. "Lieutenant, sir, that's really using your head!"

"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 425th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . Have you a knife for sale? Do you wish to advertise it in a special catalogue? Remember, this advertising doesn't cost, it pays . . .

The author, Isak Romun, has spent more than 20 years in the Army—in the Philippines, Japan, Korea, Germany, Burma. He has been a paratrooper and has written over 100 articles on military training, history, and techniques. Under the influence of his tour of duty in Germany he once collected beer coasters. "The Knife Salesman" is Mr. Romun's first published fiction . . .

THE KNIFE SALESMAN

by ISAK ROMUN

Glaser left the office of the Department Director with an appearance of emotional calm. But once he was in the corridor, this appearance vanished to be replaced by one of smoldering anger. That Faber, he thought, I could kill him!

Glaser stormed the length of the corridor until he came to the last office door. It was marked simply: *P. Faber, Chief, Investigations Division.* He pushed his way through the door to the anteroom, slammed the door, gestured impatiently at another door, and spit out, "Is he in?"

The frightened secretary squeaked, "Yes, Mr. Glaser, but—"

Glaser gave her no chance to finish but stalked across the room to the inner door. It was locked. He glared ferociously at the secretary and she hurriedly pushed a button on her desk. Glaser felt the knob release in his hand.

Inside, behind a polished walnut desk, sat a tall slender man with sharp fine-chiseled features. He greeted Glaser with a sly, weary smile. "Ah, Joseph. What brings you to my office at such an early hour?"

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"I just came from the Director's office."

"And how is our esteemed leader this morning?"

"Happy, very happy. He's happy because he has a plan from you that will not only speed up personnel examinations but save money as well."

"That's nice. Assuring his happiness is my goal in life. And how about you? As Chief of Inspections this new scheme makes life easier for you too." When Glaser didn't answer, Faber continued, "But, Joseph, please sit down. Forgive me for being such a bad host. A cigar? I have some splendid brandy."

"I don't want your cigar and I don't want your brandy. I want your honesty—if you have a shred of it left. I want you to go back down the hall with me and tell the Director that the personnel-examination idea was mine."

"And why in the world would I do that?" asked Faber, whose smile, always a source of irritation to Glaser, had remained unchanged throughout the conversation.

"Because you stole that idea from me," said Glaser menacingly. "I told you about my idea over a month ago. You stole it."

"If you mean that chance conversation in which you mentioned a vague possibility—"

Glaser interrupted, "I described a full program to you. It had only to be written down and submitted. A full program!"

"Well, hardly a full program, Joseph. Some dribs and drabs of notions perhaps. Considering the parallel functions of our two divisions, those remnants could just as well have originated here as in your division."

This was true and was an indication of the method used within the department to maintain a system of checks on its members. An Investigations Division could logically be expected to duplicate many of the functions of an Inspections Division, and vice versa. However, the department, instead of consolidating functions to save time, personnel, and money, programed and encouraged the duplication because it pitted division chief against division chief, creating competition, often bitter competition, thereby causing the chiefs to seek out the Director as arbiter.

As long as the division chiefs were at each others' throats, the organization would remain fragmented, its members unable to come together to present a united and coordinated front to the Director. He would always be the focal point of leadership in the department, actually as well as organizationally.

"Well," said Glaser, "are you coming with me?"

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"Certainly not!" The smile left Faber's features to be succeeded by a look of acute impatience. "Now, Joseph, if you don't mind; there is so much I have to do today."

"Faber," said Glaser as he left the office, "you won't get away with this. I promise you that. Not this time!"

Glaser returned to his own office and brooded over Faber's perfidy and his own impotence. It was so frustrating; there was nothing he could really do. His threats were toothless. Faber had once more cheated him out of an idea and presented it to the Director as a finished, fully developed package. Why didn't I get right on that idea and submit it myself, he asked. Then his mind was filled with unhappy thoughts of his own indisposition to work, his inability to delegate tasks, his almost constant failure to reduce his good ideas to paper as full-fledged programs.

And the worst thing about this most recent episode with Faber was that the timing was so crucial. It had been known for some time that the Director would be leaving in August for a higher position at the capital. The unofficial word in the department was that the selection of a successor for the Director had narrowed down to Glaser and Faber. An announcement was to be made early next month, in July. This latest deceit of Faber's would now surely make him the front runner for the position.

Glaser's agitation must have become visible for when George Kraft, Chief of the Operations Division, dropped in, Kraft said, "Why, Joseph, what's the matter? You look as if you're going to burst!" Whereupon Glaser poured forth the whole story.

Kraft listened patiently to Glaser's narrative, occasionally nodding his head to indicate that he had caught some point or other. He showed no emotion even when Glaser said that he would like to find some way to "remove" Faber from competition.

"Well, do you have any suggestions?" asked Glaser at the end of his recitation.

"I'm afraid not, Joseph," Kraft replied, abstractedly rearranging some papers in Glaser's In box.

"George," said Glaser in a low confidential tone, "if you do think of something be sure to let me know. If I make Director, I think I might create the office of Deputy Director and put you in it."

Kraft's hands became arrested over the papers. His face creased in careful thought. "Well," he said after a while,

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"there is a possibility, something whispered on the streets and brought back to me. There is a knife salesman in town."

"A knife salesman?"

"He's putting together a catalogue, a catalogue of knives."

Kraft explained carefully. "It appears there are some openings in this catalogue. You give him your item described on a piece of paper, he puts it in this catalogue, and your item is sold. Of course, you never see it again because, you understand, it's sold." When he saw Glaser's blank expression he added, "Really, Joseph, don't be dull. I can't be more explicit."

Glaser leaned back in his chair, a knowing smile spreading over his face. "Do you have any idea of the, ah, advertising rates?"

"No, I don't. But it is an exclusive catalogue and the rates, so I've heard, are understandably high."

"Oh, yes, understandably," Glaser agreed.

"Would you be interested in selling a knife, Joseph?"

"Yes, I believe I have a knife for sale. One I wish to sell very much and not see any more. Could you put me in touch with this knife salesman, George?"

"I think I know someone who could," Kraft said, then turned to leave the office. . .

The stocky man in the black leather coat and wide-brimmed homburg got up as Glaser approached the table. He held out his hand and said, "Mr. Glaser, is it?"

"Er, yes," Glaser answered and sat down after shaking hands with the stranger. "And you are—"

"Bleekmann, sir. At your service, I hope."

"Yes, I understand that you are compiling a catalogue of knives."

Bleekmann beamed. "Ah, the catalogue," he said, "a work I'm truly proud of, sir. At first, it was to be a highly exclusive publication featuring some fifty to seventy-five of the finest pieces available. However, our group thought we could broaden its scope somewhat, without diminishing its quality, by offering advertising space to persons of established repute, such as yourself."

"I see."

"You have a knife you wish to sell, Mr. Glaser?"

"Yes, I have a knife," Glaser replied. "He—that is, it—it is described here on this paper."

Bleekmann held up his hand. "Please, Mr. Glaser, this is the way we work this project." He handed Glaser an empty white envelope. "Put the paper with the item fully described in this envelope and seal it."

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Glaser did as he was instructed. Before Glaser sealed the envelope, Bleekmann stopped him and asked, "Have you indicated where we can pick up the item? The address?" Glaser nodded. "Good, then seal the envelope, Mr. Glaser."

Glaser did so and handed it over. Bleekmann took the envelope and placed it on the table in front of him. "I'm sure you're curious about this procedure, Mr. Glaser," Bleekmann said. "It's just that we want to play fair with our clients, probably all of whom do not wish to be associated with their wares. In this way no unscrupulous person can accost them later with a documented charge or a threat designed to extract money. The advertisements our clients buy are, in a manner of speaking, acts of charity —*anonymous* acts of charity. And that's how we will keep them, eh?"

"I understand all that. Now, if you don't mind, I would like to discuss rates."

Bleekmann wrote a figure on a slip of paper and pushed it across the table. Glaser picked up the paper, read the figure, and looked up. "Pretty steep, wouldn't you say?"

Bleekmann smiled consolingly. "Would not the return from this sale justify this relatively small outlay?" He tapped the paper. "Remember, Mr. Glaser, this advertising doesn't cost, it pays."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," Glaser said. He withdrew from his pocket a thick roll of bills and began counting off the required amount. Bleekmann handed him another envelope, a larger one.

As Glaser surrendered the bulging envelope he asked, "Can I see my knife being sold?"

"You wish to witness the sale?"

"Very much."

Bleekmann thought a moment. "An unusual request, Mr. Glaser, one that my other clients have never made," he said. "But I don't see why you can't be accommodated." He jotted an address on the other side of the paper on which he had written the advertising rate and asked Glaser, "Do you know where this is?"

Glaser looked at the address. "Yes, I do," he replied.

"The sale will be made in the basement—that side adjoining the large walled yard."

"Just one more question," Glaser said. "When is the sale?"

"Toward the end of this month, probably on the last day. We will notify all our clients of the date when it is finally decided on. This is our

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regular service. Some of our clients, you see, unlike you, may wish to be out of town during the sale."

Glaser hurried to the door and knocked three times deliberately, as Bleekmann had instructed him on the phone. The salesman had predicted correctly—it was the last day of the month. A fine sunny Saturday, Glaser thought. A good day to be alive. He also thought about how much more he would be alive tomorrow with Faber gone forever. Tonight, he decided, he would go out and celebrate.

The door was opened by a young blond giant. To his query Glaser identified himself and told him that Bleekmann had approved his presence at the sale. "Oh, yes, Mr. Glaser," the giant said, "come this way."

Glaser was led downstairs and through a dimly lit tunnel that had a light at its end. The tunnel led to a wide doorway opening out on the yard which was sunken to the level of the basement. In the yard were a group of young blond men lounging about. Nearby, a number of rifles were arranged neatly in pyramidal stacks.

Glaser's escort said, "We haven't started yet, sir, but we can put your item up first so you can get away and spend some of this beautiful day with your family. What's the name?"

"Thank you. Its name is Faber," said Glaser, impressed by the youth's consideration and courtesy.

When Faber was brought out, he stopped momentarily, looked at Glaser, and said, "So this is your doing, Joseph." Glaser smiled a confirmation. Faber smiled back, that same sly, weary smile that, today, did not bother Glaser nearly so much. Then Faber was led to the wall at the far side of the yard facing the young blond men who were now drawn up into a firing squad. An order was given and they fired.

Glaser lingered a while to watch Faber's lifeless form taken from the yard. Then he turned to go when Bleekmann and more of those blond young men came trotting down the tunnel toward him.

"Ah, Mr. Glaser, there you are," Bleekmann said. "I had forgotten that you would be here. So many details for one poor person to handle. We've been looking all over town for you."

"And why?" asked Glaser.

"I fear, sir, we have found that you too are an item in our catalogue."

"I? By whom?"

"I have no way of knowing. Perhaps you suspect someone?"

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Glaser was amazed at his calm as the realization came to him. "Faber. It was Faber. Each of us put the other into the catalogue!"

"Most unfortunate, sir. Now, if you'll just go with these gentlemen."

"But, see here, Faber's dead. They just carried him off. Good God, does it make sense to kill me too?"

"Sir, I have his commitment to fulfill, just as I have fulfilled yours." There was a look of hurt on Bleekmann's face. "Besides, as I have said, I have no assurance that it was Mr. Faber who submitted your name."

"Of course. I understand," Glaser said, ashamed that he had pleaded. He was of the old school, the type who could accept the inevitable with good grace. "It's 1894-1934 for my gravestone, then," he added quickly, attempting a show of bravado.

"I want you to know I deeply regret all this and how much I enjoyed doing business with you."

As Glaser was led to the wall, Bleekmann accompanied him, making encouraging sounds. At the wall Glaser pulled himself up to his full height, faced the firing squad, and waited. Bleekmann, still at his side, exclaimed, "I must say, Mr. Glaser, you've behaved admirably through all this. Do you have anything to say before—ah?" He shrugged in the direction of the firing squad.

"Yes," Glaser answered. "Just this!" He brought his heels together, sharply raised his arm in salute, and shouted, "One state, one people, one Leader. Heil Hitler!"

To the split moment of his death Glaser was to carry the memory of the mute admiration that twinkled briefly in Bleekmann's eyes.

The Director was speaking.

"I don't know how Division Chiefs Glaser and Faber got involved in that mess last month. Something in their backgrounds, probably, that must have displeased Berlin. In any case, you were my third choice and now you're my first. I'll recommend you as my successor which is as good as saying that the promotion is yours."

"Thank you, sir, your confidence is gratifying," said George Kraft thinking how well things had turned out—and he had only to put one advertisement in the catalogue instead of two.

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Author's Note

June 29-30, 1934, was "The Night of the Long Knives" in Germany, the period during which Adolf Hitler settled his accounts with the *Sturmabteilung,* the political army that had been instrumental in his rise to power but lately had appeared to challenge that power. The occasion was used also for a general bloodletting and many innocent persons lost their lives through one means or another simply because they displeased the Nazi overlords or were old enemies. There was a gratuitous loss of life, too, caused by trigger-happy SS troops. Afterward Hitler admitted to 58 executed and another 19 who lost their lives in other ways. A white book published later gave a total of 401 killed. The incident in *The Knife Salesman* has no basis in documentation; however, given the magnitude of the purge and the tenor of the times, it is, in its broad outline, at least possible.

"Q"

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THE TOMATO MAN'S DAUGHTER

by JOYCE HARRINGTON

The River Man sat on the deck of his houseboat sipping a cold beer. While he sipped, he watched the Tomato Man's daughter.

Elva Mildrum moved up and down the long green lanes of the tomato vines, sometimes stooping, sometimes stretching, always filling her bushel basket with bright red fruit. She was a tiny one, the Tomato Man's daughter, but golden pretty and a hard worker to boot.

The River Man licked his lips and popped the top off another beer from the cooler at his side. The river lapped tiredly against the sides of the houseboat and the high white ball of the sun sucked the juice out of all the earth. Nothing moved, except Elva steadfastly picking tomatoes, and the endless hordes of mosquitoes that had to move or die.

"Hey, Elva! Come on down!" The River Man called across the grass slope that lay between the houseboat and the tomato fields.

Elva parted the dark green leaves of the tomato vines, saw him, and waved. The River Man pulled his sticky T-shirt away from his broad freckled chest. The shirt was stained gray with sweat,

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and sweat ran out of the gray stubble of his crew cut and down the creases of his square red face.

"Come on down, honey," he called again and waved a beer can temptingly in her direction.

Elva shimmered through the fence of staked-up tomato vines. On small bare feet she floated down the slope toward the houseboat. She carried a ripe tomato in each hand.

Like a fairy princess, thought the River Man. Just like a damn fairy princess. Sweet dear Jesus! He wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hairy freckled arm.

Elva climbed the narrow board that served as a gangplank. She stood before him and held out a tomato.

"Eat it. It's good," she said.

"Thank you kindly, Elva. I will." He took the tomato from her hand. "Will you set yourself down?"

"Pa sees me here he'll whip me," she stated sadly.

"Where is your mean old Daddy?"

"Gone to Columbus. Told me to don't do anything but pick tomatoes."

"Well, he can't see you if he's in Columbus. Set down and take a rest from picking. Ain't healthy to pick all day in this heat."

"I dunno." The girl shifted restlessly around the cluttered deck and the River Man's eyes followed her hungrily. She wore faded blue shorts and a pink cotton blouse with the sleeves cut out. For all her work in the tomato fields only her arms were stained with sunburn. Her legs gleamed pale and dewy, and the downy golden fuzz on her calves seemed to the River Man like the pelt of a small defenseless animal. Her face was shaded by a wide straw hat.

"Come on, Elva honey. Set down and relax." He patted the aluminum folding chair beside his own invitingly. "Will you have a beer?"

Elva sighed and sat down. "Don't mind if I do. Thank you, Mr. Heskill."

"How many times I got to tell you. Don't call me Mister. I'm Woody to my friends. You *are* my friend, ain't you, Elva?"

"Yessir."

"Good. And I'm your friend. Now drink up."

Side by side they sat on the deck of the houseboat, Elva guiltily watching the tomato fields and Woody Heskill, the River Man, watching Elva. He watched her as she took a bite out of the ripe

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tomato in one hand and noisily sucked the juice. He watched as she sipped from the frosty wet beer can in her other hand and belched softly after each sip.

He breathed in the sharp green tang that flowed from her body. All summer she carried the bitter pungent odor of tomato vines heated in the sun. It was in her hair and on her hands and in the shallow bony place between her small white breasts. The River Man stirred uneasily and marveled at how he'd never noticed Elva until this summer and now he couldn't seem to stop wanting more of her.

"Gettin' pretty warm out here, ain't it?"

"M-m-m." Pale juice and a few tomato seeds ran down Elva's chin. She wiped it away with the back of her hand.

"Might be a tad cooler inside. Would you like to go inside, Elva honey?"

"Don't mind if I do."

Elva ripened out of season. It was almost Christmas before the Tomato Man noticed that some stray seedling had taken root in his daughter's body.

"Who done it to you, Elva?"

"Who done what, Pa?"

"Judas Priest, girl! If you're old enough to swell up like a prize pumpkin, you're old enough to know what's been done to you. Who you been sleeping with?"

"Nobody, Pa. I always sleep alone. You know that." Elva was mystified.

Earl Mildrum, tomato grower and lay preacher, accustomed to tidy platitude and comfortable euphemism in public and private utterance, was forced to be explicit. At the end of his embarrassed monologue Elva was enlightened.

"Oh, that," she said. "That was Mr. Heskill."

"Anybody else?" demanded her father.

"No. I don't think so," said Elva, trying to look thoughtful.

"You don't think so! Don't you know?"

Earl Mildrum launched into a jaw-breaking sermon, dwelling at length on the fiery torments reserved for wayward daughters, and the shame they brought on the heads of their hardworking, respectable fathers striving only to raise them up clean and pure without the guiding hand of a mother who'd had the temerity to die of a ruptured appendix when Elva was a baby.

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Elva, as always, listened rapt and uncomprehending to the words which tumbled from her father's mouth. They were fine words, words of biblical certainty: damnation and abomination, fornication and harlotry. Elva loved the strong ringing sound of the words, and thought that when her father spoke them he must be like the prophets of old telling the people how bad they were.

But she didn't really understand the words or their connection with events in the River Man's houseboat way last August. Hellfire couldn't be hotter than the tomato fields in August, and surely if she had to burn, as her father said she must, surely there would be a river nearby with a houseboat and a cooler full of beer. Elva waited, open-mouthed and vacant-eyed for him to finish.

". . . so he'll have to marry you, girl. That's all there is to it."

Elva smiled, much taken with the notion of getting married, and said, "Can I have a puppy for a wedding present?"

After bashing Elva a few satisfying whacks with a handy tomato stake, Earl Mildrum left her howling in her room and marched across his winter-stiffened fields to the River Man's domain.

In addition to the houseboat Woody Heskill's armada included several rowboats and canoes, a perpetually deflated rubber raft, a fiberglass fishing skiff, and the flagship of his fleet, an ancient PT-boat said to have seen action in the South Pacific. This relic perched on the slope overlooking the river, well out of reach of high water.

The River Man had grandiose plans for scraping its rust and recaulking its seams, with the objective of a voyage downriver to Cincinnati. But year after year the old Navy veteran sat high and dry, manned by snakes and spiders and occasional children playing war games.

Earl Mildrum scowled as he left his own neat fields and stepped into alien country. Behind him his acres stretched brown and clean waiting only for spring and the burgeoning of the queenly tomato. Four-foot tomato stakes lay bundled in military ranks and covered with plastic sheeting at precise intervals along the edges of the fields. Order prevailed in the Tomato Man's territory.

Before him sprawled chaos. Long yellow grass flattened by winter rains and shriveled by frost was studded with bits and pieces of broken-down machinery. Lengths of rusty chain lay in

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wait to trip him. The PT-boat loomed gray and menacing to his left, a haven for hibernating rattlesnakes. Across the fallow cluttered field to his right the River Man's house strewed itself along a short rise overlooking the river.

Whenever Woody Heskill felt the need for more room in his house, he simply tacked on an addition and cut a doorway through to the adjacent room. The basic house was a square green shingled affair, but fore and aft, port and starboard, the house sailed off in all directions in a maze of salvaged brick and aluminum siding, fiberglass awnings and the gray rotting timbers of an unfinished addition.

The River Man was not content with water transport as a way of life. His dooryard was littered with cannibalized cars, crippled motorcycles, disabled tractors, and a large shiny new camper, wheelless and foundered on four cinder blocks. It was the River Man's dream to construct for himself an amphibious craft in which he could swoop down the highways of southern Ohio, dipping into the river when it pleased him, emerging on the West Virginia or the Kentucky side, astounding both sides of the river with his marvelous machine. He tinkered on his dream in a weatherbeaten shack to one side of the house.

Earl Mildrum had difficulty finding the front door. There were doors aplenty, but none revealed a doorbell. He couldn't tell which door was intended to receive guests, especially a guest on such a diplomatic mission as his. In all the years that the Tomato Man and the River Man had lived side by side in the valley, they had never been on visiting terms.

The Tomato Man rapped loudly on a door that had three small rectangular windows set diagonally into peeling veneer. There was no answer. He squinted off into the pale lemony winter sunlight that defined the River Man's property.

Acres of junk, he thought. It's a crying shame. Acres of junk and not a single thing growing on it ever. Except only weeds. He envisioned the field cleared of debris, tilled and tamed into fruitfulness. He could grow a lot of tomatoes on that idle field. He rapped again.

"You lookin' for me?"

The voice came from behind. Earl Mildrum turned slowly, searching the cluttered yard for a sign of the speaker.

"Over here," came the voice again. "In the camper. Hurry up, man It's cold outside."

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The Tomato Man spotted the close-cropped gray head protruding from the half-opened door of the camper. He trotted over, picking his way carefully through scattered wheel rims and dead batteries. He stopped at the narrow steps of the camper and called through the door.

"Woody Heskill. Come on out of there. I got to talk to you."

"Can't talk outside," the voice replied. "It's too cold. Come on in, Earl. I seen you coming across the field. Says to myself, 'I ain't seen old Earl Mildrum since the Lion's Club carnival last summer. Wonder what he's comin' here for.' Come on in, man. Don't stand there with the door open."

The Tomato Man hoisted himself reluctantly onto the narrow steps and entered the camper. He would have preferred to conduct this discussion outdoors in the neutral air, or at the very least in a large room where he could pace judiciously, gesture and declaim and maintain the advantage by weight of oratory. Inside the cramped space of the camper he would be at a disadvantage both by being well within enemy territory and by having his words and motions confined to fit the boxlike interior.

The inside of the camper was hot and fuggy with the smell of coal oil and stale food. A small heater spewed warmth and fumes into the atmosphere. The tiny sink was stacked full of used TV dinner trays and a grocery sack on the floor bulged with empty beer cans. At the rear of the camper both bunks were a tumble of heaped bedding and musty pillows. Earl Mildrum eyed them speculatively.

Woody Heskill buttoned a plaid shirt over this thermal underwear and tucked the tails into his green workpants.

"Costs too much to heat that big old house," he said. "I been wintering out here. Set you down, Earl. Bet I know what you come for. Time you got a new truck, ain't it? I got just the thing for you. It's down at Bud Wither's garage. Ain't exactly new, but it's only got six thousand miles on her. Clean as a whistle and—"

"Hold on, Woody. I didn't come here to talk about no truck."

The Tomato Man slid onto the vinyl-covered bench behind the small pedestal table. Although he was short and compact, his bulky mackinaw jacket made it a tight squeeze. He was hot and uncomfortable, but felt that removing his jacket would lend the proceedings an unwelcome air of informality. Bad enough that Woody Heskill was perched on the rim of the sink with his feet swinging inches above the floor.

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"You and me, we got to come to a little understanding."

"Yeah? What about? Care for a beer?" Woody reached down and unlatched the tiny refrigerator. Earl could see that there was nothing in it but rows of pop-top cans. Woody gathered up two cans, but put one back when Earl said stiffly, "No, thanks. No beer."

"What do we got to understand? You got some gripe about my property being an eyesore? 'Member what happened last time?"

"No, it ain't that. I still think it's a shameful waste of good land. But that ain't what I come to talk about."

The River Man threw back his head and laughed. "I do believe you had your way, you'd plant the whole world in tomatoes."

"What's wrong with tomatoes?"

"Nothin'. Nothin' atall." Woody emptied half his beer can at one pull. "Well, what *is* on your mind? You got a face on you like a hanging judge, and I can't wait to hear the bad news."

"Well. It's about Elva."

"Oh, it is."

"Ah . . . Elva is . . . Um, Elva's going to . . . well, she says you're the daddy."

"Oh, she does."

"Well? Is that all you got to say?"

"Where's your shotgun, Earl?" The River Man chuckled. "Suppose I say I never laid a finger on that girl?"

"Elva don't tell lies."

"No. Elva don't. Would you say she's just a tad too dumb to go telling lies?"

"Now, look here, Woody," Earl blustered. "She maybe ain't the brightest thing in creation, but you got no call to insult her. If she was smart she never would of took up with you. She's a good cook and does what you tell her to do. She'll give you no trouble. And besides, she's kinda pretty, even if I say so myself."

"She got all her teeth?"

" 'Course she does. Wisdom teeth and all. And she don't smoke."

Woody shook his head and finished off his beer. "Anybody ever tell you you're a filthy mean old horse-trader? Suppose I say I already got a wife?"

"Now you're the one telling lies. Everybody knows you got no wife. Never had. Never would have if I don't make you do the right thing by Elva."

"Suppose I say I just won't do it." Woody aimed his empty can at the grocery sack and missed. "I'm too old a dog to get house-

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broke at this stage of the game. Why, Earl, I'd just make her miserable."

Earl Mildrum reared back and planted his forearms squarely on the little table. His chin jutted forward and his eyes narrowed craftily.

"Suppose I tell you that Elva's only seventeen. And suppose I tell you that unless you're prepared to walk nice and gentlemanly into church next Sunday afternoon, I am prepared to march that little lady right down to the police station where she will tell the whole story. Everybody knows that Elva don't tell lies."

"Like that, is it?" The River Man snaked another beer out of the refrigerator. "Well, well. I hear that old man Lutz wants to sell his houseboat. It's a lot bigger than mine, more suited to a family man, if you know what I mean. Elva sure does like living on a houseboat in the summer."

"I'll go see him about it."

"Why, thank you kindly. That's a fine wedding present you're offering."

"If you'll agree to clear all that junk off of your big field and let me plant tomatoes."

"Share the profit? Half and half?"

"Sixty forty. Unless you're willing to pitch in on the work."

"Sixty forty." The River Man laughed. "I'm a lover, not a field hand."

"It's a deal, then?"

"It's a deal. Care for a beer?"

"Don't mind if I do."

The Tomato Man's daughter became the River Man's wife with scarcely any change in the quality of her life. There was just more of it. She still kept house in her father's neat white cottage and cooked his meals for him. Then she would scurry across the fields to the sprawling heap on the river bank where she would chip away at the years' accumulation of rubbish and dirt, and cook meals for her husband and herself. Neither her father nor her husband suggested that they take meals together and thus ease Elva's chores, and Elva didn't think of it herself.

Once in a while Woody Heskill would look up from his tinkering and say, "Hey, Elva honey, don't bother cleaning up. Place gets too messy, I'll just bulldoze the whole thing into the river and let it float away. Come sit beside me and have a beer."

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And Elva would say, "Just a minute. Soon's I finish scrubbing this wall"—or hauling this trash or washing this window or whatever she happened to be doing.

If there was one thing in this world that Elva understood, it was work. When her hands were busy she felt good. There was only one thing that made her feel better, and she yearned for summer when the new houseboat would float on the river and she and Woody could sit on the deck with the beer cooler between them, and then go inside when the heat got too much for them. Drinking beer in the house and then going off to the cold dark bedroom wasn't the same. It didn't have the same delicious feeling of playing hooky, of running off to sea and spitting in the eye of all the rules.

In late April, Elva bore fruit, a red-faced wrinkled girl-baby with a thatch of red-gold fuzz on its head.

"Looks like a little old shriveled-up tomato," said her father. "Elva, you gonna be able to help with setting out the seedlings? It's getting close to time."

"Sure, Pa. I'll be there."

Her husband said, "Now, you just take it easy, Elva honey. Your daddy can afford to get himself a hired hand to help out this year. You're gonna have plenty to do taking care of this little monkey. What you want to call her?"

Earl Mildrum spoke up first. "I think you should call her Amelia, after your mother."

"I think you should call her Earleen, after your mean old daddy," said the River Man.

The two men glared at each other across Elva's hospital bed.

"I'm gonna call her Dandy, 'cause that's what she is. Just plain Dandy." Elva felt important with the baby cradled in the crook of her arm, and both her husband and her father waiting on her decision. "Dandy June Heskill, that's her name."

Dandy June lived in a laundry basket on the deck of the new houseboat. Woody brought an old rocking chair down from the house and placed it beside the laundry basket. For a week Elva did nothing but rock Dandy June and feed her, while Woody beamed proudly and poked at the baby's tiny clenched fists.

"Ain't she something else?" he said. "You done real good, Elva."

The weather was mild and clear for May, promising a long hot summer. Good tomato weather.

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Each evening the Tomato Man would trot across his fields and down to the houseboat.

"How you doin' there, Elva? Gotta get those tomatoes in next week."

"Doin' fine, Pa. Just fine. Me and Dandy June'll get those seedlings in. Don't you worry."

And Woody Heskill would mutter, "Don't have to do it if you don't want to, Elva honey."

On the Saturday evening, in addition to his reminder about planting time, Earl Mildrum said wistfully, "Elva, I ain't had a clean shirt to put on my back for three days. You gonna do some washing pretty soon?"

Elva stirred in her rocking chair. "Guess I will, Pa. Guess I'll do that right now." She put Dandy June in her basket and took the basket by its two handles and drifted off up the fields behind her sternly marching father. Woody Heskill glowered after them and opened another beer.

By Monday when the truck arrived bearing the seedlings in long wooden flats, Elva was back on course cooking and cleaning, washing and polishing, swinging like a pendulum between the houseboat and her father's cottage. Wherever she went, Dandy June and the laundry basket went too. While Elva set out tomato seedlings in neat rows, Dandy June slept in the basket in the shade of a tall old elm.

When Dandy June cried, Elva sat under the tree with her, fed her and played with her, and dearly loved her fat red baby. Elva worked harder than she ever had in her seventeen years, and was happier than she could ever remember being. She felt she could go on tending tomatoes and Dandy June and the chores of two households forever. She felt important.

One morning, when the tomato vines were knee-high and the yellow blossoms and the green horny worms had both put in their appearances, her father said to her, "Elva, I seen some mole holes round and about. There's some mole bait down in the cellar. You put it out today."

Dutifully Elva went to the cellar and got the can of mole bait. She spelled out the label to herself. *Chopped Poison Peanut Pellets.* And tried to read the instructions. CAUTION, it said. LEAD ARSENATE. But the fine print defeated her, and she decided that the best thing would be to put a handful or so into each mole hole that she could find.

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She deposited Dandy June under her tree and spent the morning searching out mole holes and dropping the poison in. The mole bait was a funny color for peanuts, sort of a pinkish gray, but it smelled like peanuts and Elva guessed that moles couldn't see very well anyway. Once in a while she thought of the little furry star-nosed creatures deep in the earth coming up to nibble at the poisoned peanuts. She didn't like to think of what would happen to them after they nibbled. But Pa said to put out the mole bait, so she had to do it. And anyway, they ate the roots of the tomato plants.

When Dandy June cried her lunch cry, Elva put the lid on the can of mole bait and put it back in the cellar. She picked up the laundry basket and carried it across the fields toward the houseboat. She was thirsty and thought a beer would taste awful good. She would sit in the rocking chair and sip a beer and feed Dandy June. Woody was out on the river somewhere trying out a new second-hand outboard motor.

As Elva crossed the fields, knee-deep in tomato vines, she saw someone sitting on the porch of the River Man's house. It wasn't Woody. Even at this distance she could see it was a woman. The woman just sat there on the top step with her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands. She looked tired. Elva decided to see who it was.

"Hi," she called out. "Hey, hi. You waitin' for somebody?"

The woman looked up, shading her eyes against the noon sun, but said nothing. As Elva drew closer, she saw that there was a small battered suitcase beside the woman on the porch.

"Hi, there," Elva said as she came up to the porch. She set the laundry basket down and Dandy June, who had been soothed by the motion, began crying again. "Nice day, ain't it?"

The woman looked at her with tired, aching eyes. "Woodrow Heskill live here?"

"Uh-huh. But he ain't here now. He mostly lives down on the houseboat." Elva pointed. "But he ain't there neither."

"Where is he?" The woman sighed.

"Oh, I dunno. Out on the river someplace. He comes and goes."

"Same old Woody." The woman sighed again. "Well, I guess I'll have to wait for him. Got noplace else left to go."

Elva picked up Dandy June to stop her crying and looked closely at the woman. She looked to be about forty years old, but it was hard to tell because of the dark circles under her eyes and

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the heavy makeup that couldn't conceal the tired lines of her face. The dark roots of her hair turned suddenly to dry brassy yellow about two inches from her scalp. She wore a sagging orange jersey dress meant for a bigger woman and high-heeled pointy-toed black patent-leather shoes. The leather was cracked and bulged over large bunions.

"Well," said Elva. "I got to go feed the baby. Are you hungry, Ma'am?"

"That your baby?"

"Uh-huh. Her name's Dandy June. Mine's Elva."

"You're pretty young to be mother of a baby. I never had a kid. If I had he might be looking after me now, instead of me having to look up old Woody."

"Is Woody your brother?"

"No."

"Cousin?"

"No."

"Any kind of kin?"

"For what it's worth, he's my husband. Though I ain't set eyes on him for fifteen, sixteen years. Did you say something about food?"

"Well, yes. Would you care for some lunch?"

"You're a good kid. Yeah, I could use some lunch. I ain't had anything to eat since yesterday afternoon. Used my last money for a bus ticket to get here. What did you say your name was? Mine's Lauretta."

"Elva. My daddy grows all those tomatoes over there."

"Yeah? And I bet you got a handsome young hubby who works in the fields and takes you to the drive-in movies on Saturday nights."

"No."

The woman looked sharply at Elva.

"You got a husband?"

"Oh, yes." Elva grinned proudly.

"Woody's not *your* brother?"

"No, Ma'am."

"And he's not your cousin?"

"No, Ma'am."

"Oh, my God. This is too good." The woman hooted. "Don't tell me. Let me guess."

Elva giggled. It was kind of funny, come to think of it.

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"You mean to tell me that sweet little lump you're holding was fathered by that shiftless old river rat?"

Elva giggled and nodded.

"And you actually married him?"

"Pa made me. But it's okay. I don't mind."

"You don't mind!" The woman shook with laughter. "Oh, this is too much." She gasped and shuddered and her laughter turned suddenly to a fit of coughing that racked her frail body.

"Oh, Ma'am. Lauretta. Mrs. Heskill. Can I get you something?"

The woman choked and put her head down onto her knees. Her answer was muffled in the skirt of her orange jersey dress.

"Got any whiskey?"

"Oh, yes, Ma'am. I believe Woody has some down on the houseboat. Can you make it that far?"

The woman raised her head and smiled. "Little girl, for a glass of sipping whiskey, I could make it to the moon."

When the River Man came in off the river, he found a party in progress on the deck of the houseboat.

"Hey, now. It's Woody himself," cried Lauretta, limp and feverishly animated in the rocking chair. She held the whiskey bottle straight-armed toward him. "Have a drink, Woody. Have a drink with Number One wife. And with wifey Number Two." She nodded and bowed elaborately to Elva.

Elva sat giggling on the deck, Dandy June in her laundry basket on one side, a neat pile of hard-boiled eggshells and empty beer cans on the other. "Havanegg, havanegg," she chanted. "Eatanegg, you old river rat. Whoops! Guess I ate 'em all."

Woody Heskill mopped sweat off the back of his neck with a blue bandanna handkerchief. "Sweet dear Jesus! Never thought to see you again, Lauretta. What brings you here?"

Lauretta shrieked with high shrill laughter. "Smelled your whiskey clear in Dayton. Said to myself, 'The old river rat won't let you down, Lauretta. Might's well go see if he's still alive and kicking.' " She widened her heavily mascaraed eyes in a maudlin parody of sentiment. "Remember those good old days in Dayton, Woody? Me waiting table all day, and you sleeping? You never did like Dayton much. Dayton made you mean and sleepy." Lauretta subsided into sullen memories.

The River Man turned to his young wife. "You okay, Elva honey?"

"Havanegg. Havabeer. Havababy. Don't cry." Elva giggled.

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"Is there any beer left?" Woody asked.

"Don't mind if I do." Elva sighed and fell asleep on the deck.

Woody Heskill reached into the cooler and pulled out the last can of beer.

"I'm sending Elva away. Should of done that in the first place. It's bigamy. That what it is. You should of told me you already had a wife."

"I did, Earl. I told you. You didn't believe me."

"You didn't say it so's I could believe you. I thought you was just trying to squirm out of your duty to Elva."

"Look here, Earl. Lauretta'll go away. She hates it here. She never did like the country life. That's why we split up in the first place. I'll give her a little money and she'll go away. Elva don't have to leave. It's only that Lauretta's sick and tired and had a dust-up with her present boy friend. Just give her a few days to pull herself together and I'll give her the bus fare back to Dayton. And she'll go. She don't want to stay with me. She don't even like me. She just needs a little vacation."

The two men stood in the dim cool camper, the Tomato Man short and square and angry, the River Man bemused by his need to hang onto Elva. Lauretta was in the River Man's house sleeping off the effects of the previous afternoon and evening, while a white-faced and repentant Elva, under instructions from her father, was removing all her belongings from the houseboat.

"Where are you gonna send her, Earl?"

"Where you can't find her. You ain't ever gonna see her again, Woody. And you ain't ever gonna see Dandy June neither. My daughter and my grand-baby are too proud to live sinfully with another woman's husband."

"Oh, stop spouting, Earl. That's my baby as much as it is your grand-baby. And Elva don't mind about Lauretta."

"No. Elva don't mind. Elva never minds. That's why I got to mind for her. And I mind a lot. She's going. Today."

Earl Mildrum stomped out of the camper and marched away across the deep green tomato fields. Woody Heskill stood in the doorway and thought about how Elva had come to him. He hadn't really wanted her except as a pretty playtoy through the hot summer days. He hadn't courted her or paid much attention to her. He'd let old Earl bulldoze him into marrying her, and she fitted easily into his ways.

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That was the thing about Elva. She was an easy person to have around. He'd grown used to the green tomato smell of her, to the warmth of her kitten-soft body in his bed. And then there was Dandy June. Woody tried to puzzle out how he felt about them, about losing both of them. He never thought or spoke of love, but it pained him to think of sitting on the deck of the houseboat with only the beer cooler for company.

Elva cried in the kitchen. Her clothes were all packed and ready for the trip. She was going to her mother's sister's place in Indiana. She didn't want to go. She rubbed the welts on her legs where the peach-tree switch had stung and burned. They only itched now, but Elva still cried.

The real hard pain was inside her. When Earl Mildrum had told her that morning that he wanted her to leave, that she must clear all her things out of the houseboat and that she and Dandy June would have to go and live with Aunt Millie, she had defied him.

"No," she said. "I ain't going."

"You're going," he said. "Nobody will know you there. You can keep your shame to yourself. Anybody asks, you can tell them your husband died in a car wreck."

"I ain't ashamed and I ain't going. I got a husband. You made me get married. It's all your doing."

That was when he'd cut the peach-tree switch and whipped her just as if she was a little kid and not a married woman with a baby. She had cried at first from the cutting pain of the switch on her bare legs, but she kept on crying long after that pain had turned numb.

Even as she wept, Elva's idle hands caused her misgivings. The kitchen was swept and clean; Dandy June was taking her afternoon nap. There would be no more meals to cook in this house. Or on the houseboat. Elva was waiting for her father to finish irrigating the long tomato rows. Then they would be off in the car on the long drive to Indiana. At the thought of the drive a new freshet of tears fell down Elva's cheeks.

"Got to find something to do," she muttered.

She got out the big old kettle and a jug of syrup.

"I'll make something for his sweet tooth," she said to herself. "I'll make something sweet and leave it for him and he'll find it when he comes back from taking me to Aunt Millie's. I'll be in

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Indiana and he'll be here and he'll have something sweet to eat to remember me by."

She poured syrup and sugar into the kettle and added a tad of water. She put the kettle on the stove and stirred it a bit. While it was heating, she ran down to the cellar. When she came back the syrup was bubbling. She stirred and stirred and when the syrup was sticky and thick she poured in the contents of the can she'd brought from the cellar. It was a funny color, but after the sugar syrup turned brown no one would be able to tell the difference.

Elva stirred the mixture in the big iron kettle and her tears stopped flowing. What was it Pa always said? "The Devil makes work for idle hands." Yes. Well, it was true.

She smiled as she thought of coming back from Indiana after Pa ate the peanut brittle. Would they call her on the phone? Or send a telegram? Either way would be just as good. "Your Pa's dead," they would say. "Come home." And she would come back home and live on the houseboat and work in the tomato fields. Woody would still be there, but she didn't mind about that.

The syrup bubbled and thickened. When it was brown and so thick she could hardly stir it any more, she slicked it down with a gob of butter and threw in a spoonful of soda. The syrup foamed up and turned butterscotch yellow. She poured the sticky yellow mess onto a cookie sheet and smoothed it out. All the lumps and bumps were covered with yellow candy. It looked real good. And it smelled real good. She set the cookie sheet on the window sill to cool.

Elva put the kettle in the sink to soak the sticky candy off. While she was scrubbing the stove clean, she heard a sound at the window.

"Psst. Elva. Elva honey."

"Oh, Woody. You better go away. Pa sees you here, he'll whip me again."

"Elva. Come away with me. We'll get on the houseboat and float downriver. We'll go as far as we want to and then we'll stop a while. Just you and me. And Dandy June."

"Pa told me not to set foot out of the house until he's ready to go."

"You always gonna do what he tells you to do?"

"I guess so. I guess I just don't know what else to do." Elva felt the tears starting up again, and scrubbed hard at the sticky kettle.

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"What's this here?" Woody was poking at the hardened sheet of candy on the window sill. "It sure smells good."

"Oh, it's just some peanut brittle. I made it for Pa."

"Elva, I just don't understand you. He treats you like a dumb little puppy dog and you go making peanut brittle for him." Woody poked at the candy again. "It's hard enough to crack. Elva, break me off a little piece of peanut brittle. I just love homemade peanut brittle."

"Woody, get your hands off of that. That's for Pa. Nobody else."

"If you want it, come and get it." Woody snatched up the tray of candy and backed off from the window. "This looks too good for your mean old Daddy. If you don't come and get it, Elva, I'm gonna eat it all up."

Elva stood at the window. "Woody, put it back. Please, Woody. I can't come out there. Pa said not."

"Elva, you got to make up your mind. Either you're gonna go all your life doing what he tells you or you're gonna come with me on the houseboat. I'm gonna set right here and eat this peanut brittle till you make up your mind which one it is."

Woody sat down on a stump in the yard and picked up a rock to crack the hard sheet of candy. Elva stood in the window and watched him.

"Please don't break it," she cried. "Please don't eat it. It's for Pa."

"Make up your mind, little lady. It's either him or me."

"Woody, I can't. I just plain can't. I don't know what to do." Her voice trailed off in a plaintive moan. She stood in the window and watched him raise the heavy rock and bring it down on the shiny surface of the peanut brittle.

"No! Oh, no!" she cried. "It was for Pa. I only meant it for Pa."

"Well, Devil take your mean old Daddy. He ain't getting none of this."

Elva watched as Woody lifted a jagged chunk of candy and put it into his mouth. His hard square teeth chomped up and down and he licked his lips.

"This is real good, Elva. You ought to come on out and have some." Woody ate another piece of candy.

Elva, in the window, shivered. Woody was right. It was either him or Pa. One or the other. Dimly she realized that if Woody wasn't there, she wouldn't have to make up her mind. She wouldn't have to go away. Pa would always be there to tell her

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what to do, and she could just go on tending to Dandy June, tending tomatoes, cooking and cleaning. She could be happy and busy and work hard without all this having to make up her mind between them. It would be better that way. Without Woody.

"Come on out, Elva honey. Come out and have a bit of this peanut brittle. It's real good. Come on down to the houseboat and we'll eat it all up and have a beer."

"I'm sorry, Woody. I really meant it for Pa. But you can have it if you want it. It's all the same to me. I don't mind."

Elva closed the window. She put the lid back on the empty can of mole bait and threw it in the trash. The kitchen was neat and clean. She sat down to wait for her father to come in from irrigating the tomato fields. He would tell her what to do next.

"Q"

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THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

This time, playing the hand as dealt, your mentor must lead his column with a novel of classic detection from the past. But it's not really a gripe. Since luck has provided three first-rate mystery thrillers, two with overtones of espionage, they need be supported by only one title from the hoard kept for that purpose. And who am I to complain at so limited a demand on my reserves?

Though published as long ago as 1928, *The Prisoner in the Opal,* by A. E. W. Mason, has lost none of its vividness, its humor, or its hypnotic charm.

Wealthy, ultra-English Mr. Ricardo, kind of heart and romantic of soul, is caught into the evil web spun round many picturesque characters at Diana Tasborough's Chateau Suvlac in the French wine-making country near Bordeaux. We meet handsome Diana and her estate manager, Robin Webster; we meet Monsieur de Mirandol and the American heroine, Joyce Whipple. Particularly we meet Mr. Ricardo's friend Hanaud, the big French detective with keen wits as well as primitive sense of humor; even his misuse of the English language has Gallic style and *panache.*

Why did lights burn late in the conference room at the Chateau de Mirandol? Who stabbed tempestuous Evelyn Devenish and hacked off her hand at the wrist? What feature linked the Cave of the Mummies to the home of an unsavory old harridan called the Widow Chicholle? If they have abducted Joyce Whipple, where are they holding her? Hyper-aesthetes tend to play down this book or ignore it; pay no attention to them. If once more I must send you to dusty old shelves for an out-of-print title, I swear you will find *The Prisoner in the Opal* second only to A. E. W. Mason's admitted masterpiece, *The House of the Arrow.*

Though the espionage which explodes through William Harrington's *Scorpio 5* (Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, $8.95) is industrial rather than international, it can be no less deadly or destructive in domestic life.

The scientific genius of our beautiful anti-heroine, Giovonna

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("Johnny") Verona, has been employed by General Carlton Xavier's Alpha Gemini Corporation in Florida. But they won't give her credit (or cash) for developing that incalculably valuable new computer, Scorpio 5, whose plans have been stolen. Tad Putnam, brilliant young lawyer, proves that "Johnny" is compelled to confess: that she herself is the thief.

Though she has been bribed by an elusive con man called Heath, behind Heath lurks some unknown, shadowy figure who has masterminded it all. Aided by our repentant anti-heroine, Tad Putnam sets out to nail both Heath and the man unknown. Murder, mayhem, trickery attend the trail until a final shoot-out beside the lake traps the master plotter and brings this tale of strong action and even stronger emotion to its fitting close.

With no pause for breath James Mitchell's *Death and Bright Water* (Morrow, $6.95) sweeps us from London to Grecian isles in another series adventure whose motivation, even when murderously crooked, is still more crooked than would appear.

It seems mainly a private mission when Former Secret Agent and Professional Killer David Callan is offered riches if he will rescue Sophie Kollonaki's daughter from "protective custody" in Crete. But Callan senses the hand of the Russian K.G.B.; he has refused the offer when his old secret-service chief blackmails him to accept. And to this mission of mercy Sophie's cousin, Greek Tycoon Michael Vardakis, adds a mission of murder.

Thus for Callan, with his unfortunate little friend Lonely, begins a nightmare spy-dance of betrayal and double crossing, with no ally to be trusted and most danger where it seems safe. Surviving booby-traps as well as bullets, Callan rescues Helena Kollonaki. With the last enemy conquered, the last peril gone, Callan and Lonely look forward to a holiday which, the reader will agree, should be anywhere on earth except Crete.

Night Judgment at Sinos, by Jack Higgins (Fawcett, 95¢), also carries us to the Aegean, but for a different kind of thriller with its own devastating impact.

How Jack Savage, hard-bitten Irish adventurer, finds battle, intrigue, and romance in waters still seething with the ancient hatred between Greek and Turk. The aristocratic heroine, Lady Sara, proves less haughty than she looks. Narrated by as adroit a storyteller as any now in business, this is one paperback you must not miss.

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a *NEW* story about

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In which William Shakespeare, playwright-poet-actor, investigates a most unusual Sixteenth Century mystery—the "miracle problem" of how a man known as The Monkey escaped from Cassandra's Castle unseen and undetected, and how the Immortal Bard not only solved an "impossible Elizabethan locked-room mystery" but came up with no less than five different solutions! Count them—five! . . . Have you ever wanted to read a story about a brothel in Shakespeare's time? About the most successful and notorious bawdyhouse in London . . .

CASSANDRA'S CASTLE; or, The Devious Disappearances

by J. F. PEIRCE

Montague House
London, England

Mr. Ellery Queen
229 Park Avenue South
New York, New York 10003

Dear Ellery:

Herewith is another case in which Will Shakespeare, actor-playwright, displayed his extraordinary powers of ratiocination. It concerns a locked room of sorts. And he devised not one but *five* methods of escape from it.

The brothel described herein is that same notorious stew operated by Mistress Holland and depicted in Shackerley Marmion's *Holland's Leaguer*, published in 1632, forty-six years after the

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events in this story. *Leaguer,* as you probably know, was a cant term for brothel.

CASSANDRA'S CASTLE:
or, The Devious Disappearances

"The reason I summoned you," Lord Burleigh said, addressing the young actor-playwright, Will Shakespeare, "is far different from the last, when I sought your assistance with respect to the increasing number of rogues and vagabonds in the city. This time the matter is of little consequence. It has to do with a scandal at Court—a conundrum that plagues our curiosity."

He paused and gestured to the three men seated with them in a conversational circle—William Davison, Queen Elizabeth's Scottish secretary; Sir Francis Walsingham, Her Majesty's Secretary of State; and Henry Herbert, the Earl of Pembroke and President of Wales.

"Frankly," the Lord High Treasurer continued, "I have bet these gentlemen a considerable sum that you can undo the tangled skeins of events that comprise this puzzle. If you do, half my winnings will be yours. But win or lose, I will pay all expenses."

"His Lordship has bragged mightily on you," Walsingham said. "We've been anxious to make your acquaintance."

Both Davison and the Earl nodded.

"First, let me give you the facts as we know them," Lord Burleigh said, pulling at his beard. "No doubt you've heard of the Countess of Chommondley, who is famous for her height, which is o'er six feet, and for her constant companion, an ugly little man, no larger than a child, who's called The Monkey."

Shakespeare nodded.

"He was a magician when they first met. In fact, he still entertains at the Countess' parties. Women are attracted rather than repulsed by his appearance—perhaps because he makes the ugliest of women *seem* attractive by comparison."

"Not that the Countess has any need for such comparison," the Earl said. "She's a damned attractive woman with a willowy figure." He coughed, then added, "That is, those who've seen her in *other* than a farthingale report so."

Lord Burleigh smiled and curled the ends of his moustache with the backs of his index fingers. "It's the curse of our age that women conceal their nether halves in such floor-length garments."

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"I confess I agree, Your Lordship," Shakespeare said.

"Though The Monkey's had numerous chances to betray the Countess with younger, more attractive women," Burleigh continued, "he remained faithful to her till recently. Then a few months ago he met the courtesan, Cassandra—"

"The one they call The Giantess, Your Lordship?"

Burleigh nodded. "She's o'er six and a half feet tall, and by piling her hair high and wearing those damnable Italian *chopines,* she adds another half-foot or so to her height. You do know what *chopines* are?"

"Aye. Shoes with thick, cork platform-soles," the playwright said. "Boy actors who play women's parts wear them to increase their stature." He paused, then asked, "How came The Monkey to meet Cassandra, Your Lordship? I thought she ran a brothel in Southwark?"

"She does," Burleigh said, "and a most successful one." He frowned, then went on: "The Court attracts all kinds. Some, bored with their lives and their own kind, surround themselves with such courtesans and criminals to add zest to their existence. One such fool introduced Cassandra to the Court. And as she towers o'er the Countess and is statuesque, whereas the Countess is slender, The Monkey fell madly in love with her—and she with him. Since then he's spent most of his time with her to the dismay and displeasure of the Countess."

"Why does he not leave the Countess altogether, Your Lordship?"

"Because she's a woman of great wealth and his tastes are many and expensive."

"I should think that Mistress Cassandra would be equally wealthy, running as she does such a notorious brothel."

"Nay. Her wealth is as poverty compared with that of the Countess."

"Have you seen her brothel?—Cassandra's Castle, as 'tis called," Washington asked.

"Only from a distance, Sir Francis."

"Let me describe it for you, then. In effect it's an island, as 'tis surrounded by a moat. And it can be entered from but one side—by a drawbridge, which is guarded by a pander dressed in full armour and carrying a halberd. And its three-storey house has a studded door containing an espial wicket."

He paused, then continued. "I don't know about Lord Burleigh

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but the rest of us have all been there for one reason or t'other. It's the fashionable place to go—to see and be seen. The island has a large formal garden for amourous strolling and an arbour for *al fresco* entertainment. One can obtain the finest of food and drink there, be entertained with music and the reading of plays and poetry, and see elaborate displays of fireworks at night."

"Fortunately it's located outside the city," Davison interjected. "Otherwise, our Puritan friend, the Lord Mayor, would have ordered it closed."

Lord Burleigh coughed, and Walsingham and Davison allowed the Lord High Treasurer to pursue his tale.

"As time passed," Burleigh said, "the Countess became increasingly distraught. And each time The Monkey went out, she set lackeys to following him. Last week, after a rather disagreeable argument between them, she decided to bring the matter to a head. She had twenty of her lackeys in disguise follow him. At first, he appeared unaware that he was being followed, for he made straight for Southwark.

"But once he had crossed London Bridge, he evidently realized that men were dogging his heels, for he tried to elude them—but without success. When he entered the castle, the men surrounded it as if laying siege. And a short time later the Countess arrived at the gallop in her carriage, like a general about to direct the course of battle."

Lord Burleigh paused and pushed up the ends of his moustache with the backs of his index fingers. "Seeing the Countess," he went on, "the guard notified Cassandra, who set about entertaining her 'guests' royally to take their minds off the fact that they were, in a sense, imprisoned. Food and wine were brought from the cellars. Strolling musicians played for their entertainment. There was much merriment and carousal. But amidst all this activity, no one caught even the briefest glimpse of The Monkey.

"The Countess, for her part, made arrangements for a house to be available to her nearby. She sent for food and water and more lackeys. And when they arrived, she stationed them about the moat with the others to watch the castle. At most no two of them were more than six yards apart.

"Darkness approached. The Countess ordered torches, and each sentry was given enough to last out the night. On the island, lanterns and flambeaux were lighted. There was dancing, and there

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were water displays and fireworks. Rockets spangled the night with coloured stars. A fire-drake winged its way across the sky. Reflected light danced upon the water."

The Lord High Treasurer paused again. "The revelry lasted throughout the night, and the Countess and her men maintained their ceaseless vigil. Then, with the first light of dawn, the drawbridge was lowered, and Cassandra in a red velvet farthingale swept majestically across it, like Drake's *Golden Hinde* under full sail swept before the wind. She was closely followed by her guard, walking stiff-legged in full armour.

"'What do you want?' Cassandra demanded rudely when she at last stood before the Countess.

"'My Monkey! My precious Monkey!' the haggard Countess replied.

"'Go home!' Cassandra commanded. 'You'll find him there.'

"'You lie, for he lies with you in the castle!'

"'Nay. I swear he's not under my roof, though he's under my protection. Go home! You'll find him there. He's at home where he is.'

"'Let me enter the castle and see for myself!' the Countess demanded.

" 'Very well,' the courtesan replied and gestured towards the open doorway.

"Leaving half her men still surrounding the island, the Countess led the others across the drawbridge. They searched the house from cellar to rooftop and the garden and the arbour as well. But The Monkey had disappeared as the night with the coming day.

"At last convinced that he was not there, the Countess retreated in defeat across the bridge without looking at or speaking to the courtesan, who had remained with her guard on shore. Leaving some of her men still to watch the castle, the Countess returned home to discover The Monkey asleep in his room, a smile of satisfaction o'erspreading his features.

"At the sight of him, the Countess broke down and wept. And when her weeping awakened him, she begged his forgiveness, and while the rogue had her thus at his mercy, he made her agree to a villainous bargain—to allow him to divide his time between herself and Cassandra."

"Now our question is," the Earl said, leaning forwards, "how did The Monkey escape from the island?"

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Shakespeare frowned. "Is there no chance that he escaped before the guards were posted, My Lord?"

"None. The men saw him enter the castle, and they had the island surrounded before he could escape."

"Did anyone leave the castle *after* he entered, My Lord?"

"No one. A short time after The Monkey entered, a boy entered with a sack o'er his shoulder, crossed the bridge *to* the castle, and once he was across, the drawbridge raised."

Shakespeare frowned. "What would a boy be doing on the island, My Lord?"

"There are two boys who work there. They care for the garden, run errands for the girls, and do such-like."

"I see. Could any of the lackeys have been bribed to look elsewhere, My Lord, while The Monkey escaped?"

"I doubt it. Too many others would have seen him."

Shakespeare bent his brow in concentration, and the others waited in silence for him to speak.

"There are three ways of escape from the island," Shakespeare said at last. "By air, o'er the water, and across the bridge. Four if, by chance, there's a tunnel under the moat."

Lord Burleigh shook his head. "We've anticipated you on that score," he said. "The man who built the castle still lives, and he assures us there is no tunnel."

Shakespeare slitted his hooded eyelids and ran his thin fingers through his swept-back auburn hair. "I assume we can rule out that he flew through the air like the fire-drake. Can he swim? Perhaps he swam the moat and escaped when one of the lackeys had his attention momentarily distracted."

"He's an excellent swimmer," Burleigh said. "He's strong and wiry and has defeated much larger men in hand-to-hand combat who have made slighting remarks about his appearance and size. But the moat is guarded by two crocodiles, ten feet in length or longer. They're rumoured to be well fed, but I doubt he would care to test that rumour."

"Surely they aren't in the moat constantly, My Lord."

"No. There *are* ramps that they can climb and walkways on both sides of the moat for them to crawl about on and sun themselves. The walkways are guarded by spiked-iron fences, high enough so that the crocs cannot escape into the street or the garden. On occasion the beasts are pinned down with forked sticks and chained to one of the fences so that the girls and their guests

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can swim in the moat. But they weren't chained that night. Several of the guards reported seeing them floating in the water."

"Then he must have escaped across the drawbridge, Your Lordship."

"But how? It was kept raised till morning." He pulled at his beard thoughtfully. "Well, do you think you can solve this puzzle?"

"I can try, Your Lordship. How long do I have?"

"A week," Burleigh said glancing at the others, who nodded.

"Could Cassandra be persuaded to let me put on a performance duplicating The Monkey's escape?" Shakespeare asked.

Lord Burleigh turned to the Earl.

"I think it can be arranged," the Earl said. "My secretary, Peregrine, is a frequent visitor to the castle. Cassandra's quite fond of him."

After learning the whereabouts of the Earl's secretary, Shakespeare rose and said, "Then I'll meet Your Lordship and these gentlemen at the castle at this time next week." And bowing, he departed.

The next morning, accompanied by Dick Burbage, the talented actor-artist, and Peregrine, the Earl's hawk-like secretary, Shakespeare went to Cassandra's Castle. The island was as it had been described. Two crocodiles floated lazily in the water. One opened its great mouth, revealing its sharp white teeth, and the playwright shuddered.

Overhead, a thin wire stretched from a triple window on the third floor of the castle to a double window on the second floor of a building on shore. The wire canted downwards at a 15-degree angle. It was obviously not strong enough, Shakespeare observed, to support the weight of a boy, not even of a small one.

A fire-drake, or fiery dragon, rode above the wire. The winged dragon, as the playwright knew from having helped make one as a boy, was constructed of thin strips of wood, bent and tied to form the shape of the dragon. This framework had been covered with paper scales and the scales had been painted.

Metal canisters containing a slow-burning gunpowder were located in the dragon's mouth and tail, so that when they were lighted, the dragon would appear to belch fire. A larger canister of gunpowder hung below the wire, counterbalancing the dragon and supplying its motive power. Neither the dragon nor the canis-

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ter, Shakepeare noted, was large enough to conceal The Monkey, thus eliminating the dragon as a means of escape.

The pander on guard was dressed in armour made of thick, heavy leather, and as they approached, he raised his visor and smiled. Peregrine spoke to him familiarly, and they were permitted to cross the bridge and enter the brothel. Inside they were greeted by Cassandra, who towered over them. Shakespeare was both attracted to and repulsed by her.

After gaining her permission, Peregrine conducted the actor and the playwright on a tour of the castle. In Cassandra's quarters, while searching her wardrobe for a possible hidden passage, Shakespeare discovered two of The Monkey's suits, both bright orange, concealed amongst the courtesan's clothing, and he could not help smiling at the disparity in their sizes.

Later in the garden, Peregrine introduced Shakespeare and Burbage to Cassandra's girls. The courtesans were of different colours, shapes, and sizes, and Shakespeare was amazed at the variety.

Once the tour was completed, the playwright instructed his companions as to what he expected of each of them.

"That's too much to accomplish in but a week!" Burbage protested. "I doubt it's possible."

"Get Cuthbert and others to help you. Money's no problem—you'll be well rewarded."

"If you insist," the actor grumbled. "I'll try."

"Good lad! I know you can do it," the playwright said.

Burbage and Peregrine left the castle shortly thereafter, but Shakespeare remained a while longer to get the feel of the island and observe its life.

Later that morning Shakespeare appeared at the manor house of the Countess of Chommondley. A few pieces of silver to the cook gave him entrance to the kitchen and the answers to a number of questions. A few pieces more enabled him to search The Monkey's bedroom and wardrobe. At the sight of so many pastel-coloured suits, the playwright gave an involuntary whistle. He whistled again when The Monkey's manservant pointed out the suit The Monkey had worn the day he disappeared. The suit was bright orange and of a distinctive design.

After obtaining the name of The Monkey's tailor, Shakespeare sought out one of the lackeys the Countess had had follow the lit-

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tle man that day. And for a few pieces of silver, the lackey led the playwright along the path The Monkey had taken.

He had made straight for Southwark; then, realizing that he was being followed, he had taken a twisting-turning route down alleys and sidestreets. But the last hundred yards were in the open. It would have been impossible in daylight for his pursuers to have mistaken or overlooked either the colour of his costume or its distinctive design.

Later that day at The Monkey's tailor, Shakespeare was not surprised to learn that The Monkey was in the habit of ordering several suits at a time. And as the tailor kept patterns for all of them, he readily agreed to make six copies of The Monkey's bright orange suit and at once set his apprentices to work on them.

The following week, as stipulated, Shakespeare met Lord Burleigh and the others at the drawbridge of Cassandra's Castle. Accompanying the playwright were four boy actors whom Peregrine had recruited for him from the Children of The Royal Chapel at Blackfriars. Each of the boys wore a floppy orange hat, a bright orange suit, and a monkey's tail and mask that Dick Burbage had made. The youngsters were capricious and unruly, and Shakespeare had to reprimand them often.

The group was joined moments later by the actor, Will Kemp, who approached them from across the bridge. He was wearing Cassandra's red velvet farthingale, and its skirt had been hastily pinned up to keep it from dragging on the ground. For though Kemp was a big man, he was half-a-foot shorter than the giant courtesan.

The four "monkeys" scampered about him, leaping and jumping. They moved hunched over, their knuckles touching the ground, and they chattered: "Chi! Chi! Chi!" in their high-pitched voices till Shakespeare silenced them.

Once all was ready, Shakespeare sent Kemp back across the bridge to the island and then had one of the boys remove his mask and tail, so that he could be readily identified. The boy had a large strawberry birthmark on his right cheek, and Shakespeare had Burleigh and the others inspect it, so that they would know that it was real and not make-up.

Then with Burleigh, Davison, Walsingham, the four monkeys, and forty lackeys following him, Shakespeare led the way to the

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spot where The Monkey had realized that he was being followed. At this point, Shakespeare sent the boy with the strawberry birthmark on ahead to play The Monkey's part, and the boy set off along the path The Monkey had taken, followed closely by the rest. He was out of sight for brief moments when he turned corners suddenly, but at last he was in the open with no place to hide, and he made his way quickly across the drawbridge and into the castle.

Shakespeare then asked Walsingham to play the part of the Countess, and Walsingham gave the lackeys careful instructions, stationing them around the moat.

Shortly thereafter, a boy carrying a sack over his shoulder crossed the drawbridge and entered the castle. Shakespeare, followed by the three remaining monkeys, crossed the bridge also, and the bridge was at once raised.

Immediately a party began in the garden. But though Kemp, dressed as Cassandra, and Shakespeare were much in evidence, nothing was seen of the four orange-suited boy actors or the boy with the sack. Shakespeare appeared briefly at the third-floor window to check the fire-drake for the evening's performance, and later he was seen in the garden, drinking and flirting with some of the girls. Later still he was noticed walking about the edge of the moat, as if checking on the positions of the crocodiles.

The day wore on. Afternoon became evening. The watchers grew impatient. Burleigh sent for food and drink and a supply of torches. Though the liquid refreshments were plentiful and varied, the men did not drink heavily, wishing to keep their heads clear and their eyesight sharp.

Night fell. Rockets sent rainbows arching across the sky or burst in showers of falling stars. The firey dragon winged its way over the moat in search of St. George or a beautiful damsel. A water fountain became a liquid vase of fluid flowers. Those on the island caroused into the night, their revelry continuing till sunrise.

Then the drawbridge was lowered, and Kemp, dressed as Cassandra, clomped across the bridge, followed by the playwright and the stiff-legged guard in full armour. Kemp stumbled once and almost fell when he tripped on the hem of the farthingale, but Shakespeare fortunately caught him.

The big actor seemed to have grown in his part, for when he and Walsingham repeated the angry exchange between the Count-

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ess and Cassandra, his gestures were properly mincing and his voice convincingly falsetto.

Once the exchange between them was completed, Walsingham called 20 of his men to follow him and led them across the bridge. As before, the castle was searched from cellar to rooftop, and the garden and the arbour as well, but none of the four boy actors was found. And the boy who had carried the sack across the bridge was also missing. At last admitting defeat, Walsingham gathered together his men and returned to the shore.

"Well, are you satisfied, gentlemen?" Burleigh asked.

"Damn me, no!" the Earl exclaimed. "And I'll not be till I receive an explanation of their disappearance." He turned to the playwright. "My compliments, young man. I'm sure we all agree that his Lordship has most definitely understated your talents."

"I confess that I, too, am anxiously awaiting your explanation," Burleigh added.

"Instead, allow me to give you a demonstration if you will," Shakespeare said. He whistled and the four boy actors minus the floppy orange hats they had worn and the boy with the sack appeared out of a house nearby, and followed by Kemp and the visored guard, they scampered across the drawbridge, which was once again raised.

"You'll recall," Shakespeare said, "That I explained that there were three ways to escape from the island—by air, by water, and across the bridge. Four if there was a tunnel, which was eliminated on the builder's evidence and my own examination of the castle and island. Now let me demonstrate, first, how The Monkey *could* have escaped by air."

The playwright pointed to the third-floor window of the castle where one of the boys was attaching a fire-drake to the wire stretching from the island to the shore.

"Now," Shakespeare said, "see what happened under cover of darkness, while your attention was centered on the lewd carousal taking place in the garden before the fireworks began."

The playwright whistled, and the boy was joined at the window by Peregrine and Dick Burbage, who removed the fire-drake and began pulling on the wire, which was loosened by Cuthbert Burbage, who stood in the second-floor window of the house on shore.

To the end of the wire, as it issued from the house window, Cuthbert attached two ropes—one heavy, the other light. And once the heavy rope was secured inside the castle, Peregrine started

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pulling on the lighter rope, drawing a larger, sturdier fire-drake out of the window of the house on shore. When it reached the castle, its hinged top was thrown open, and the boy entered. The gunpowder was lighted, and the dragon flew down the rope and was caught by Cuthbert Burbage, who helped the boy out of its bowels.

"Marvelous!" Lord Burleigh exclaimed.

"It's like a *deus ex machina,* a machine in which the gods come down to earth to settle the affairs of mortals, as used in the masques at Court," Davison said.

Shakespeare nodded. "Now imagine that the aerial fireworks cease. The watchers' eyes are drawn by a sudden burst of activity to the people in the garden. But keep *your* eyes on the castle window and see what *could* have happened under the cover of night."

Shakespeare whistled. A second boy climbed out the window. Grasping the thick rope, he swung hand-over-hand down it, to disappear into the house on shore as the watchers applauded.

Immediately the rope was pulled back into the window, and the wire installed in its place.

"Now consider the possibility of escape by water. Pray look at the crocodile in the water," Shakespeare said. "Remember that it is night with only flick'ring torches to light it and shimm'ring reflections to confuse the eye."

The playwright whistled, and on cue the crocodile swam across the moat and crawled up the ramp to the walkway along the shore.

"Keep *your* eyes on the crocodile," Shakespeare said, "but imagine, if you will, a tremendous burst of rockets that would draw the eye of e'en the most dedicated watcher skyward."

Again the playwright whistled, and the crocodile reared upwards, revealing a shell-like framework that had concealed a third boy dressed in dark clothing, his face and hands blackened with burnt cork. Quickly the boy slid the crocodile shell into the water, then slipped over the fence and, keeping low, ran towards the house on shore.

"Where did he come from?" Burleigh demanded.

"He donned the shell and slid quietly into the water while you were engrossed in watching the fire-drake wing its way across the sky. Like the fire-drake, Your Lordship, the crocodile was designed by Dick Burbage and built under his direction. The real crocodiles are chained at the back of the garden."

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Again he whistled. "It's daybreak," he said.

As he spoke, the drawbridge was lowered, and Kemp, followed by the stiff-legged guard, strode across it towards them. Reaching the shore, Kemp acted overly coquettish till Shakespeare frowned, causing him to assume a more decorous demeanour.

"Now let us examine the possibility of escape across the drawbridge," Shakespeare said. "Imagine, if you will, the dialogue behind Cassandra and the Countess. Visualize her men moving across the bridge towards the castle. *Look!* Look at the open doorway!"

Though Burleigh and the others looked as directed, nothing happened—no one appeared. Then, turning back to the playwright, they gasped. For a fourth boy stood by his side.

"God's blood!" Burleigh exclaimed. "How did you perform *this* miracle?"

Stepping over to Kemp, Shakespeare lifted the skirt of his red velvet farthingale, revealing the *chopines* that added half-a-foot to his height. And at a nod, the boy actor slipped between Kemp's legs, and Shakespeare dropped the skirt as he would a curtain.

"So *this* is how The Monkey escaped the island!" Burley exclaimed. "Apollo gave the Trojan Cassandra the gift of prophecy, then placed a curse upon her when she would not lie with him, so that none would believe her. Like her namesake, Mistress Cassandra spoke the truth *and* the Countess did not believe her. 'He's not under my roof,' she said, 'though he's under my protection . . . He's at home where he is.' He *was* under her 'protection'—for he was under her dress which protected them both. And surely he *was* 'at home' between her legs."

"God's wound!" Walsingham exclaimed. "What a delightful way to disappear!"

"But *where* is the fifth boy?" Davison demanded.

Shakespeare turned to the guard, who lifted his visor, revealing himself to be the fifth boy.

"He's wearing short stilts 'neath his armour," Shakespeare said. "And his gauntlets are designed with false hands to make his arms appear longer."

"But where is the orange suit of the boy in black face?" Pembroke asked. "They all appeared white and were dressed alike when they returned to the island after their escape."

Shakespeare pointed to a sack beside him. "The boy who escaped betwixt Kemp's legs carried the orange suit," he said.

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Burleigh frowned. "But by which of these means *did* The Monkey escape?" he demanded.

Shakespeare smiled and said, "By none of them, Your Lordship." He whistled, and the boy with the strawberry birthmark came out of the castle. "I sent him across the bridge to the castle with the others since, as you recall, the lad dressed as the guard did not remove his disguise during the first escape."

The viewers appeared dumbstruck.

"Your Lordship was right," Shakepeare continued, "in saying that, like her namesake, Cassandra spoke the literal truth. But you were mistaken in your interpretation. The Monkey *was* at home—at the Countess' manor. He both supped and slept there whilst the Countess spent a drear day and a sleepless night watching the castle."

"God's blood!" Burleigh said. "Keep us not in suspense! How did he manage it? How do you know?"

"I *know,*" Shakespeare said, "because I questioned the Countess' cook and The Monkey's manservant—something no one else bothered to do. They told me that The Monkey provoked a quarrel with the Countess on the morning he 'disappeared,' that he goaded her into sending men to follow him by saying that if she caught him on the island, he would give up Cassandra, but that if she tried and failed, he'd give up *her.*"

"Monstrous!" Burleigh said.

"Earlier I'd discovered two orange suits belonging to The Monkey hidden amongst Cassandra's clothing. Later I discovered a third orange suit in The Monkey's wardrobe. This, plus the fact that on his way to the castle he'd have been out of the view of his pursuers each time he turned a corner and could have escaped at these times, yet apparently he made no effort to—which aroused my suspicions."

Burleigh nodded.

"Then I remembered the lad with the sack o'er his shoulder and the strange fact the once he crossed o'er the bridge, it was raised as if on cue. 'What,' I asked myself, 'if The Monkey had hired the two boys who work at the castle to hide in doorways along his route dressed in identical floppy hats and suits of orange clothing—could he not have slipped into a doorway on turning a corner where one of the lads was hidden, and that lad then took The Monkey's place in the chase?"

"But why *two* boys?" Pembroke asked.

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"To make doubly sure of his escape, My Lord, because of the high stakes for which he was playing. If his pursuers were following too close when he reached the first lad's hiding place, he could increase his lead and change places with the second. Then, whichever lad was passed by could remove his orange suit, having his own clothes under it, put the suit in the sack, the sack o'er his shoulder, and return to the castle."

"But why would The Monkey concoct such a scheme?" Davison asked.

"To trick the Countess into agreeing to his dividing his time betwixt herself and Cassandra. In that way he would have the best of both of his worlds—love *and* money!"

Burleigh frowned. "What I cannot understand," he said, "is *why*, knowing The Monkey did not escape from the island, you still put on such an elaborate performance?"

"*For two reasons, Your Lordship. For one, since you had such a* sizeable bet with these gentlemen, I wished to give them the most for their money."

"And the other?"

"To be perfectly honest, Your Lordship, I wished to determine how *I* would have escaped had *I* been trapped on the island."

Walsingham laughed. "And which method would you have used?" he asked.

"Can there be any doubt in your mind as to that, Sir Francis?" the playwright countered.

Lord Burleigh smiled, and the others applauded.

FINIS

Well, Ellery, although this case did not directly influence any of Shakespeare's plays, it did aid him in creating the Bawd in *Pericles* and Mistress Overdone in *Measure for Measure*. And no doubt it taught him much about the art of misdirection, which is so essential in the theater.

And this experience with the boy actors undoubtedly provoked his famous indictments of them in *Hamlet* and *Anthony and Cleopatra*. In the latter play, he has Cleopatra say: "Antony shall be brought drunken forth, and I shall see some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness i' the posture of a whore."

With warmest regards,

Frank

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a NEW crime story by

NEDRA TYRE

Did you ever hear of someone who laughed until she died, as if she had been tickled to death? And what in the world was Samantha Atkins laughing about? After all, she was not known to have a sense of humor, and she did know she was on her deathbed, and to top it all, she had just been poisoned . . .

LAUGHTER BEFORE DYING

by NEDRA TYRE

Samantha Atkins

Samantha Atkins was dead. Her death didn't surprise anybody as she had been at death's door for two weeks. She had even had an earlier warning six months before when she had suffered her first serious, almost fatal heart attack. She had recovered. A little of the fire had gone out of her, but none of the spirit.

Then two weeks ago she had collapsed in her lawyer's office and had been in critical condition ever since. She was spending her last days in Atkins Hospital, a memorial to her husband, in what amounted to a presidential suite.

No visitors were allowed.

People were just waiting for the word that she had died.

There were a few skeptics who doubted that she was grievously ill. They said they would believe she was dead when they saw her in her coffin. More than one insisted they wouldn't be surprised if Samantha weren't playing possum. Some insisted that even if she was sick she would recover completely. If Samantha makes up her mind to live, she'll live, was the way they put it.

The optimists were wrong. Samantha did die, but her heart condition wasn't the cause. She had been poisoned.

But no one would believe it. There had to be a mistake. The hospital was giving out a false report. Who on earth would have poisoned Samantha? What need was there to poison some-

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one who was already on her deathbed? If you wanted to state it crudely, poisoning Samantha was as foolish and wasteful as shooting a person who was mounting the gallows to be hanged.

The strangest, most mysterious thing about it all was that the nurses who saw Samantha through her last moments said that they had never heard such hearty laughter. At first they hadn't realized what it was. They hadn't been actually in the room when they had heard the rollicking sound since Samantha hated to have anybody with her—they had been hovering in the hall and adjacent rooms.

But when they saw and heard that thunderous laughter coming from her they couldn't believe their eyes and ears. It was, one of them said later, as if Samantha had been tickled to death. They were all practised in observing people *in extremis*, but no nurse—and no doctor, for that matter—ever remembered anybody laughing until she died.

Not much in the world had amused Samantha, unless it was having her way about everything and she wasn't given to laughing even then. She considered it her due to have everyone dance to her tune. But something had certainly titillated her when she was dying.

Poisoned!

It was too hard to believe.

How?

But, above all, by whom?

Sally Spenser

Sally Spenser had asked at the desk for Samantha's room number. The half-opened door had a *No Visitors* sign on it, but there was no one to stop Sally and all she planned to do was to leave the candy on the bedside table.

Samantha dominated the room as she had dominated life. No doubt Samantha had told death exactly when she would allow it to approach and on what terms.

"I brought you some chocolates, Samantha. Maple-nut creams. I know they're your favorite."

Samantha didn't answer. Perhaps she was asleep. More likely she was being her usual rude self. Samantha had always interested Sally, and Sally was fond of her. Of course Samantha's manners and ruthlessness were deplorable, but they were predictable. There was no question as to what to expect from her. No one escaped her machinations. Well, Samantha had prospered, if having money was everything, and most people seemed to think it was.

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There was no use in standing there looking at Samantha. It was an invasion of privacy, really, and Sally turned to leave. All of a sudden Samantha reached out for the box of candy. Her head still lay on the pillows but her hands were as busy and greedy as those of a child shucking off wrappings from a Christmas parcel. Then Samantha's mouth parted almost as wide as if she were in a dentist's chair and she began to pop maple-nut creams onto her outstretched tongue.

Sally Spenser smiled and left.

The next night she had a most unexpected caller. When the doorbell rang her soufflé was almost ready. It needed steady watching and of course somebody *would* ring the bell. Her supper would be ruined if she went to the door. Whenever she made hardboiled eggs nobody showed up, but let her make a soufflé and she could count on someone arriving at the crucial moment when the pyrex dish was about ready to be pulled from the oven.

She mustn't be rude and keep the caller waiting. She turned off the oven and left the soufflé to its sad fate.

Ted Rankin of the Police Department stood at her front door.

"Mrs. Spenser?"

He knew good and well who she was. In a town that size everybody knew everybody.

"I want to ask you a few questions about your visit to Mrs. Atkins."

And when, Sally wanted to say, is visiting the sick a crime? As well as she remembered, visiting the sick was among the cardinal virtues—or was she thinking of burying the dead?

She didn't say anything and Ted Rankin stood first on one foot and then on the other. He seemed to be groping for words.

"Well, nobody identified you for sure, but one of the nurses thought it was you she saw going down the hall."

"When are the police supposed to track down visitors to the sick?"

"It's not that exactly. You see, somebody gave Mrs. Atkins a box of candy that was poisoned."

If Ted Rankin had announced the end of the world she couldn't have been more surprised.

"That is preposterous," Sally Spenser said and advanced toward him in indignation.

He shuffled backward to keep his distance from her and knocked a pot of begonias off the ledge; then he apologized and said he meant no harm in asking her about the candy, he was only trying to do his job, and

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then he looked sheepish and muttered goodbye.

Of course the nurse had been right. Sally had visited Samantha and there was no denying that she had brought a box of candy.. And at what a sacrifice! Her mouth watered even then when she thought of those beautiful plump nuggets of maple-nut creams in their little paper nests. She had wanted them for herself, but Samantha was as crazy as Sally was about maple-nut creams, and even though Samantha was desperately ill Sally was positive it would cheer her up to have the candy.

Then Sally Spenser reeled.

Those creams had been meant to poison her!

It was only by the grace of God or the irony of the devil that Sally wasn't dead instead of Samantha. Just suppose Sally were in her coffin that very minute as she had every right to be. She saw herself lying there surrounded by that pink taffeta that the Jones Funeral Home lined their caskets with. She gazed at herself with folded hands and closed eyes. Oh, she hoped that Julius Jones hadn't painted her cheeks in that garish way that was supposed to represent lifelike flesh tones. She must leave specific instructions not to be painted. She would insist on having a closed casket. No one was to see her after she was dead.

Sally reprimanded herself for behaving in such a befuddled, self-centered manner. What foolishness had prompted her to act as if she could see her own self in a coffin? And what did it matter what happened after she was dead? But she wasn't dead, thank heaven, even though she was supposed to be.

Josephine Foster had given Sally that candy. And Josephine Foster must account for her action. Sally must have it out with Josephine.

What would she say? How could she word her accusation? When your supposed best friend had tried to murder you, how did you proceed? The human heart was truly unfathomable. Here she and Josephine Foster had in a manner of speaking been living out of each other's pockets. They exchanged recipes, had lunch together several times a week, barged in and out of each other's house, mostly by the back door without so much as knocking. Yet somehow or other Sally had so aroused Josephine's hate that death by poison was to be her fate.

How could Josephine have done such a thing? Why, Josephine's mother on her deathbed wouldn't take

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medicine from anyone but Sally. She refused the nurses and doctors and Josephine herself and had turned to Sally.

Suppose that Sally, in spite of her innocence, was found guilty of murdering Samantha?

What did they do with murderers now?

Capital punishment had been abandoned, she thought, but there had been such a hue and cry lately about restoring it that it would probably be put back on the books by the time she was sentenced.

Sally was too heartbroken to confront Josephine face to face and accuse her.

She would telephone.

"That candy you gave me was poisoned, Josephine," she said, and then she hung up. She'd never in her life hung up a telephone in anyone's ear, but she did then. Sally wanted to cry. She had a right to cry. When the person she thought the most of in the world had tried to poison her she had every reason to cry her eyes out. She waited for the tears to come, but there wasn't so much as a drop in either eye. There were things in this world too deep for tears.

She went to the kitchen and scraped the soufflé from the pyrex dish into the garbage and then she went to the porch and picked up the shattered pot of begonias. She must report it, but she didn't have the heart to do anything just then.

Josephine Foster

Josephine Foster was too stunned to answer Sally Spenser. Of course she had given Sally the candy, but it was some that had been given to her.

Josephine had felt that Jill Harrison, her son's fiancée, didn't like her. But giving Josephine a box of poisoned candy was taking things a bit too far.

Josephine had been as cordial as she had known how in welcoming Jill as a potential daughter-in-law, and she had tried to steer herself away from the pitfalls of being the widowed mother of an only child, and a son at that. Through the years she had done her best not to be possessive and she had seen to it that Alan had male companionship and father figures. Her brothers, though they lived out of the state, had included Alan in their families' plans—Alan had camped in summer with his first cousins, had skied with them in winter, backpacked with them in spring, and had taken several trips abroad with them.

Then she had worried when Alan came home after graduat-

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ing from the university law school and had settled happily into his old bedroom and had opened an office on Main Street. He had pooh-poohed her suggestion that he take an apartment of his own. "Mama," he said, "I'd shame you. What would people say if I moved out on you? Besides, I like your cooking. Anyway, I'll be leaving soon enough. I'm looking for a wife."

It had taken him two years to find Jill Harrison, a young teacher who did special work with children, something to do with remedial reading or the use of language. Josephine wasn't exactly sure what Jill's title and training were. Alan was on all kinds of committees and had met Jill at a meeting of some sort. One day he brought Jill home and introduced her as his fiancée, and Josephine and Jill had exchanged very large smiles but, for all that, they didn't take to each other.

Why couldn't Josephine like Jill? Even the way Jill talked somehow annoyed Josephine. The girl was from somewhere in the Middle West where the people prolonged their r's and pushed their voices through their noses. Not that Jill talked much. In fact, she seldom talked in Josephine's presence. Josephine was used to conversationalists who jousted to keep the ball rolling, even though the exchange was nothing but chitchat. But Jill barely nodded after Josephine had rattled on and on in pursuit of some topic of conversation, and with that terse action had killed once and for all Josephine's chatter.

Josephine even found fault with Jill's name. Jill. What kind of name was that? A name from a nursery rhyme. What sort of parents did she have who would name a girl Jill?

Things had improved greatly last week because of the dinner at which Jill had been hostess to Alan and Josephine. The evening had been delightful. Jill had reserved a table in a pleasant, uncrowded restaurant. She had ordered a delicious meal and had the most beautiful flowers for a centerpiece. When dinner was over she had insisted that Josephine take the flowers home with her. That was more than enough, but then she had given Josephine a box of candy.

The flowers were exquisite but the candy looked—well, it looked sort of secondhand; the box was slightly crumpled and smeared with fingerprints, and yet what was so strange was that Jill had pressed it on her as if she were giving Josephine the crown jewels. She thrust the box toward Josephine in the

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way a child gives its mother something she has made and is so proud of that she's about to burst.

No wonder Jill had seemed so animated or agitated in handing over the chocolates. It would have taken the arrogance of a Borgia to present them with any degree of composure. And she very carefully waited to give Josephine the candy until they were leaving the restaurant. Otherwise Josephine would have opened the candy and passed it around, but it would have been too awkward to do that as they walked along the crowded street to Alan's car. Alan didn't eat sweets, as Jill very well knew, so there was no danger that her darling husband-to-be would be a victim. It was all cleverly planned so that Josephine alone would eat the candy.

Well, Jill Harrrrrrison wasn't going to get away with it.

Josephine would tell Jill that she knew she had tried to poison her.

Jill answered the telephone immediately.

"Jill Harrison speaking," she said.

Even the way Jill answered the telephone annoyed Josephine. Why couldn't she just say hello like ordinary mortals? And Jill's tongue trilled both r's in Harrison for the longest, most irritating time that Josephine had so far heard.

Josephine identified herself but thought of no introductory remark. She couldn't ask how Jill was, and it was hardly the time to comment on the weather.

"Jill, I'm very upset. I've just learned that the candy you gave me was poisoned."

There was no reply. No denial. No apology. Just another of those long silences Josephine had invariably suffered in Jill's presence.

The wait was painful and awkward, but Josephine intended to have an admission of guilt or at least a remark of some sort from Jill. But none came.

Josephine hung up.

She had never before hung up on anybody in her life.

Josephine had wanted to put the candy in the garbage as soon as she got home from dinner with Jill and Alan. If only she had given in to that impulse, but nothing should be wasted, especially not candy when Sally Spenser was so crazy about it. Sally must have Jill's present, though something would have to be done about the mutilated box.

Josephine had gone to a cupboard in the pantry where she

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kept odds and ends and found a beautiful tole box that she had bought to keep gloves in, then had decided it was so pretty it must be used sometime as a special gift box. She was happy to see that the candy fitted perfectly into the tole box. Sally would be delighted. How nice to have a special little treat to pass along to such a darling friend.

And now Sally thought that Josephine had tried to poison her.

But what had actually happened was that Jill Harrison had tried to poison Josephine.

Jill Harrison

Jill Harrison hung up the telephone and returned to the stacks of students' papers on the battered card table that listed on spindly, unsteady legs. All the furniture was makeshift in the small furnished apartment she rented by the week. What a contrast there was between the shabby ill-matched pieces around her and the graceful antiques in Josephine Foster's Greek Revival house.

Another unbridgeable gap between her and Alan's mother was that Jill couldn't cook. She could barely open a can without mutilating herself. Thank God for TV dinners and convenience foods. Even if she could have cooked she didn't have the time to prepare proper meals—her students demanded every possible moment and she gave it gladly. It hadn't seemed likely that her life could have had enough room for love, but there was more than enough room for Alan and his love for her and her love for him.

It was his mother who made Jill feel uneasy.

After all the awkward dinners with the Fosters in their elegant home, Jill had ventured to invite them to be her guests in a restaurant, and the evening had gone beautifully. Jill had been proud of the way she looked in her new dress. She was always neat but her clothes were serviceable instead of chic, and it was nice to know that she had a knack for fashion.

That night she had worn the engagement ring that Alan had given her. It had belonged to his grandmother. Alan didn't seem to mind that she didn't wear it habitually, but it was a bit showy to flaunt at work and was a monster in snagging stockings and pantyhose and in getting hung in loose threads of her sweaters.

She had felt very sentimental that night as she was about to leave for the restaurant. She admired Mrs. Foster for her beauty and the way she dressed and ran a household. She had done an admirable job in rais-

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ing Alan—with all that money and his being the only child he could have been absolutely ruined. Jill admired Mrs. Foster. What she wanted was to love her. How could she not love Alan's mother? What choice did she have but to love the person who had nurtured such a fine person as Alan? And then in that exaggerated moment of sentiment Jill decided to give Mrs. Foster the present Jill loved most in the world—the box of candy Robert had given her earlier that day.

Of course she shouldn't have accepted the present. Teachers were absolutely forbidden to take gifts from their students. But how could she refuse Robert? He had been so intense, so happy, so excited to give her a present that he had clung to it as if someone might tear it from him. The imprints of his moist, nervous hands were on the box and he had crushed the cardboard a little in holding it so tight and so close.

Jill looked with rage at the telephone as if to blame it for having conveyed the information that the candy was poisoned. She began to cry.

She felt there was no consolation for her anywhere. Why had she hypnotized herself into thinking that she had helped Robert and he had given her his trust?

When she had first taken him as a special student he had impressed her as being as near autistic as any child she had ever taught. For long weeks there was no response from him—only a blank mask. Nothing would induce him to read or talk. Neither shame nor encouragement would elicit an answer from him. He took her accusations with the same lack of emotion that he took her blandishments and compliments. Nothing flickered behind his dead eyes.

"You must learn to read, Robert," she told him over and over. "You must. There's magic in words. Life can never be dull when you learn to like to read. Language is the greatest gift we've ever been given. You can't refuse to accept it and use it."

At last there was to be victory.

After all her long patient hours and all her wheedling and bullying there was a reward. Robert began to read, hesitantly at first, then quickly. He wrote slowly at first, then so rapidly that the words were illegible.

She was proud of him and he knew it. And he had seemed to be proud of himself, but not at all cocky, and then one day there had been the unexpected gift of candy.

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But what she had thought was pride in himself must have been arrogance. He was just waiting to be able to express his hatred and hostility. He wanted to show her his contempt for what they had accomplished together.

And evil came from evil. The evil from Robert which she had mistaken for affection she had passed on to Mrs. Foster. She had given that candy to Mrs. Foster with such pride and even with a sense of sacrifice at parting with what pleased Jill most.

Jill's tears had wet the top papers that she had planned to read and correct. She must be sensible and get on with her work, and then she must put one of the chicken pot pies in the oven for her supper, and then try to decide how to confront Robert.

The night was a torment of sleeplessness and a sense of having been betrayed.

Thank goodness she had Robert in the first class. She could not have postponed talking with him, and she asked to see him privately as soon as the period was over. She had decided not to accuse him. She would make a simple statement and wait for him to answer.

"Robert, the candy you gave me was poisoned."

He had been smiling as he stood waiting for her to talk to him, but when she had spoken his face changed back to the mask he had worn all those long dead months when he had refused to read or write or talk.

Robert shrugged, turned around, and walked slowly out of the classroom.

Bessie Green

Robert's rage shocked his mother, Bessie Green. What was that foolishness about the candy being poisoned? He had begged her for the candy and she had told him she wanted to enjoy the candy herself, and he grabbed it from her and she grabbed it back. That wasn't like Robert. He wasn't one to show his feelings. Then she told him all right he could have the candy.

She knew she'd been unfair to Robert. But life had been so hard. She hadn't wanted Robert. He'd come along to surprise her when her hands were too full already. He minded her from the beginning. He didn't give her any of the trouble the older boys did. Never mind that her love was for them. She had to follow her heart. Those older boys had run her a hard race. Everything was up to her. Their father came when he liked and went when he liked and then died the year Robert was born.

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That Sonny was a handful. Reform school. Later, trouble with the police. Then escape from jail. No telling where he was now. Every letter in the mailbox had her heart leaping that it might be some word from him.

For a while it had looked as if Joe would follow in his older brother's footsteps, but somewhere along the way that boy took hold of himself. She didn't have anything to do with it. She was too busy keeping a roof over their heads to have much time for child raising. She'd never forget that time the principal came to see her. Oh, Lord, she had thought, here we go again.

First Sonny, now Joe. But not at all. The man wanted her to know she had an exceptional boy in Joe. He ought to go to college. There were lots of scholarships. And somehow Joe had made it. He had to work, of course, because there wasn't a scholarship that covered everything and there was precious little she could give him. He would come in off a job and not so much as take a drink of water before he turned to his books and studied all night. She had thought she worked long hours. Well, she had no cause to complain when she saw what Joe did.

Bessie's one consolation had been Mrs. Litton. When Sonny got into scrapes it was Mrs. Litton who paid for the lawyer. When Sonny needed bail it was Mrs. Litton whom Bessie went to. When Bessie was worried out of her mind and went to see Sonny in jail it was Mrs. Litton who paid her no matter that she didn't work that day. That last year when Joe had to have more time to study it was Mrs. Litton whom Bessie asked for part of the tuition and the books and lunch money and carfare for Joe.

But then when the great day came and Joe was graduated, his name was called twice during the exercises for honors in history and third highest grades in the whole class, she hadn't been able to mention her problem to Mrs. Litton. Joe had to have a present and he had a chance to go on a charter air trip with his classmates to Spain and Portugal. He'd never had a vacation. Who in the family had ever had a vacation, for that matter? Joe just had to have this. He had to. She could go to Mrs. Litton for bail money and lawyer money for Sonny and for school expenses for Joe, but for something special like a graduation trip for Joe she didn't have the face to ask.

So she sinned against God and Mrs. Litton and she sinned gladly by taking silver from the

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top shelf—it didn't do anybody any good at all, it hadn't been used for years—and pawning it. There was so much silver left it didn't even leave an empty space. Well, Joe had got his trip. And Mrs. Litton had given him $100 for a graduation present—nobody else Bessie worked for so much as sent him a card. And Bessie was a thief. No, she wasn't a thief. She'd just been pushed too far. But she felt guilty because she *was* guilty and she'd die if Mrs. Litton ever found out.

Robert was sitting in the corner glowering at her. Poor child. He never had laughed or cried. In plenty of families the youngest was the favorite. But nobody had ever paid any attention to Robert. He didn't do well in school but they promoted him anyhow. Always changing their tune at schools. If poor Sonny hadn't been bullied by teachers things might have been different, if they had passed him along; but they held him back, made him ashamed of being so big and still in the third grade.

This last year there had been a change of some kind in Robert. Maybe he was trying to imitate his big brother Joe. Anyway, Robert began to study. But he was still too tight-lipped to tell her what might be interesting him. She kept him clean and she fed him and if he wanted to be sullen she didn't have any jokes to tell him to cheer him up.

Now he was beating his fists on the table. He was in such a rage she didn't know what to expect.

"That candy you gave me was poisoned."

He was starting up again about the candy.

"Son, I didn't know that. I'm sorry." She never had called Robert son before. He wasn't even called Bob or Bobby.

Then Bessie Green understood the significance of what Robert had said.

Mrs. Litton had given her that candy. Bessie had thought all the time she had worked for her that Mrs. Litton was too good to be true. It was hard to believe that anybody could be so kind and generous. She had a heart as big as all outdoors, and though she owned one of the prettiest and largest houses in the best section of town she wasn't what you'd call rich. She'd let the gardener go and for two years she'd been doing her own cooking, and the trim on the brick house hadn't been painted for six years.

But there must be a mean streak in her. Mrs. Litton was getting back at Bessie for taking the silver. She had known all along that Bessie had stolen

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it. Maybe she'd even sneaked up behind her and watched her take it down from the shelf, and she had just bided her time to punish Bessie.

Angela Litton

Angela Litton had never seen Bessie sulk before. Instead of going about her duties in her usual competent way she seemed to attack the house. The blinds rattled, the pans crashed like the timpani of an orchestra, doors slammed, dust billowed from carpets, the clotheslines chattered when Bessie flung the laundry on them. "Bessie, dear, do you feel all right?"

Bessie echoed to herself, "Bessie, dear, do you feel all right?"

"I feel all right considering," Bessie said. For all Mrs. Litton knew Bessie might be in the last throes of death by poisoning.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. But it could be. My, but it could be. That poor child so proud to be taking his teacher a present and what do you know, it was poisoned."

"What poor child?"

"Robert."

"Who is Robert?"

"Robert's my youngest boy."

"Bessie, you've never mentioned Robert to me. I didn't know you had a child named Robert."

"Well, I have. That poor child has had to fend for himself. Nobody to take up for him. Me worried out of my head over Sonny and Joe and finally Robert learns to read and begins to like school and he takes his teacher a present that's poisoned."

"Bessie, that's most distressing."

And Bessie muttered to herself, "Bessie, that's most distressing." Then she said, "Mrs. Litton, I owe you a lot. My boys and I owe you a lot," and the thought of the silver struck her. "We owe you a lot more than I can ever thank you for but that doesn't mean you can do what you did. I'm a human being the same as anybody."

"Bessie, dear, I don't know what you mean."

And Bessie whispered to herself, "Bessie, dear, I don't know what you mean." Then she said aloud, "That candy you gave me was poisoned. I'd have eaten it and been in my grave if my little boy hadn't grabbed it to give to his teacher."

There was more than time for that to sink in and still Mrs. Litton said nothing. They were in the same room and stood near each other, but when Mrs. Litton spoke her voice seemed to come from as far off as a

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grave in Moreton cemetery over by the river.

"Bessie, please stop what you're doing and make me a pot of tea."

Bessie propped the vacuum against a closet door. She should have told Mrs. Litton to make her own tea. She should have told her to look her longest because that was the last she was going to see of Bessie. But she couldn't help falling into her old habits. Nothing was too good for Mrs. Litton.

Bessie made the tea and poured it into the prettiest teapot, though with so many to choose from who could say which was the prettiest? Bessie selected the one she knew Mrs. Litton favored. Mrs. Litton was crazy about blue and white china, and God help Bessie she went to the rosebush just outside the kitchen door and cut two buds to set in a little Waterford vase with the other things on the tea tray.

"Bessie, will you have a cup with me?"

"I don't care for hot tea. Ice tea is all right in the summertime with lots of lemon and sugar and a sprig of mint."

"Then make yourself some coffee."

"I've got my work to do."

Mrs. Litton poured a cup of tea, and then she set the cup at a distance as if she didn't intend to drink it after all.

"Bessie, I didn't know the candy was poisoned. It was given to me by someone from whom I didn't want to accept a favor, not even the gift of a box of chocolates. I thought you might enjoy it. It's come as a great shock that you would think I'd try to poison you. And it's an equal shock to learn that someone wanted to poison me."

Bessie wanted to cry. She wanted to cry her eyeballs out the way she did that first time Sonny went to jail. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Litton."

The cup of tea grew tepid. Angela Litton didn't want it. But she needed it. She raised the cup to her lips, then set it down without sipping from it.

She had planned to go to Samantha Atkins' funeral that afternoon and she supposed she would go after all. But Samantha hadn't planned for Angela to be alive to attend her funeral, whenever it might be. She had taken particular pains to keep Angela away.

When had Samantha visited Angela? It had to be before her second heart attack when she had gone back to the hospital. For years Samantha had tried to feud with Angela, but Angela would have none of it. Samantha would sweep past her at parties or meetings or

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gatherings and Angela would nevertheless greet her. Over the years she had been snubbed and vilified by Samantha.

Then out of the blue Samantha had appeared at Angela's door saying she had come to end their grudge. Angela assumed that Samantha's first heart attack had changed her, that having been so near death and realizing that it could overtake her at any moment she saw how foolish her imagined enmity had been.

There was no factual basis for the feud. Archibald, Samantha's son, was an alcoholic before he was out of his teens, and he had shown some slight interest in Angela's daughter Susan. But Susan didn't care for him; besides she was engaged to her childhood sweetheart. Later, after Susan had married and moved away, Archibald had gone to Italy and had shot himself. But no one except Samantha had seen any connection between those events. Long before Susan had married, Archibald had courted half a dozen other girls, but they and their parents were as little eager to encourage his attention as Susan and Angela had been.

In some strange warped way Samantha held Angela responsible for Archibald's suicide and insisted that if only Angela had given Archibald's love for Susan half a chance and not forbidden them to see each other, Archibald would be alive that very minute. Samantha had sworn she would get even with Angela if it took her the rest of her life.

Samantha Atkins

Samantha Atkins had not been known to have a sense of humor or even a sense of the ridiculous, though she was adept at laughing at other people's embarrassments and quick to laugh at anyone in an awkward situation. And irony was beyond her.

But even Samantha, entirely lacking in humor and lightness, had been amused to the extent of laughing uproariously on her deathbed at the way fate had contrived to get her to gobble the poisoned chocolates she had delighted in preparing for her old enemy Angela Litton.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Petrella story by

MICHAEL GILBERT

first publication in the United States

Mrs. Coulman's activities were well known to the police. She picked up stolen articles and fenced them. She ran a "carrier service" and her cut for services rendered was one-third of the proceeds.

Now, the police had Mrs. Coulman under constant surveillance—they saw every move she made, observed every step she took. A whole squad, 24 including Detective Sergeant Petrella, watched her—from parlor windows, street corners, bus stops, taxis, vans, pubs, subway platforms—from everywhere. And yet—

THE COULMAN HANDICAP

by MICHAEL GILBERT

The door of number 35 Bond Road opened and a thick-set, middle-aged woman came out. She wore a long gray coat with a collar of alpaca wool buttoned to the neck, a light gray hat well forward on her head, and mid-gray gloves on her hands. Her sensible shoes, her stockings, and the large fabric-covered suitcase, which she carried in her right hand, were brown.

She paused for a moment on the step. Women of her age are often near-sighted, but there was nothing in her attitude to suggest this. She had bold, brown, somewhat protuberant eyes, set far apart in her strong face. They were not unlike the eyes of an intelligent horse.

She looked carefully to left and to right. Bond Road was never a bustling thoroughfare. At twelve o'clock on that bright morning of early April it was almost empty. A roadman,

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sweeping the gutter; a grocer's delivery boy, pushing his bicycle blindly, his nose down in a comic; the postman, on his mid-morning round. All of them were well known to her. She waited to see if the postman had brought her anything, and then set off up the pavement.

In the front parlor of Number 34 a lace curtain parted one inch and closed again. The man sitting on a chair in the bow window reached for the telephone which stood by his hand and dialed.

He heard a click as the receiver was lifted at the other end and said, "She's off. Going west." Then he replaced the receiver and lit himself a cigarette. The stubs in the tray beside the telephone suggested that he had been waiting for some time.

At that moment no fewer than 24 people, in one way or another, were concentrating their attention on Bond Road and on Mrs. Coulman, who lived at Number 35.

"It's a carrier service," said Superintendent Palance of S Division, who was in charge of the joint operation, "and it's got to be stopped." Jimmy Palance was known throughout the Metropolitan Police Force as a fine organizer, a teetotaller, a man entirely lacking in any sense of humor, who worked with a Pawnbrokers' List and the Holy Bible side by side on his tidy desk.

"The first problem of a thief who steals valuable and identifiable jewelry is to get rid of it. What does he do with it?"

"Flogs it?" suggested Superintendent Haxtell of Q Division.

"No fence'll touch it," said Superintendent Farmer of X Division. "Not while the heat's on."

"Then he hides it," said Haxtell. "In a safe deposit, or a bank. Crooks do have bank accounts, you know."

"Or a cloakroom, or a left-luggage office."

"Or with a friend, or at an accommodation address."

"Or sealed up in a tin, under the third tree from the corner."

"No doubt," said Superintendent Palance, raising his heavy black eyebrows, "there are a great number of possible hiding places. I myself have listed twenty-seven distinct types. There may be more. The difficulty is that by the time the thief wishes to recover his loot, he is as often as not himself under observation."

Neither Haxtell nor Farmer questioned this statement. They knew well enough that it was true. A complicated system of informers almost always gave them the name of the perpe-

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trator of any big and successful burglary. "All we then have to arrange is to watch the thief. If he goes near the stuff we will be able to lay hands on the man himself, and his cache, and his receiver."

"True," said Haxtell. "So what does he do?"

"He gets in touch with Mrs. Coulman. And informs her where he has placed the stuff. Gives her the key, or cloakroom ticket, and leaves the rest to her. It is not even necessary to give her the name of the receiver. She knows them all and gets the best prices. She gets paid in cash, keeps one-third, and hands over two-thirds to the author of the crime."

"Just like a literary agent," said Farmer, who had once written a short story.

"Sounds quite a woman," said Haxtell.

"She has curious antecedents," said Palance. "She is German. And I believe, although I've not been able to check it, that she and her brothers were in the German Resistance."

"The fact that she's alive proves she was clever," agreed Haxtell. "Now, I gather you want quite a few men for this. Tell us how you plan to tackle it."

"It's going to be a complicated job," said Palance. "But here is the outline . . ."

At the end of the street, after turning into the main road, Mrs. Coulman had a choice of transport. She could take a bus going south or could cross the street and take a bus going north. Or she could walk 200 yards down the hill to the Underground Station, or an equal distance up it to another. Or she could take a taxi. She was a thick woman of ample Teutonic build, and experience, gained in the last month of observation, had suggested that she would not walk very far.

Near each bus stop a man and girl were talking. Opposite the Underground a pair of workmen sat, drinking endless cups of tea. In a side street two taxis waited, a driving glove over the meter indicating that they were not for hire. A small tradesman's van, parked in a cul-de-sac, acted as mobile headquarters to this part of the operation. It was backed halfway into a private garage, chosen because it had a telephone.

Mrs. Coulman proceeded placidly to the far end of Bond Road, waited for a gap in the traffic, crossed the main road, and turned up a side road beyond it.

An outburst of intense activity followed.

"Still going west," said the

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controller in the van. "Making for Highside Park. Details one to eight, switch in that direction. Number one car straight up Loudon Road and stop. Number two car parallel. Details nine and ten, cover Highside Tube Station and the bus stops at the top of the hill."

Mrs. Coulman emerged, panting slightly, from the side road which gave onto the top of Highside Hill, paused, and caused consternation in the ranks of her pursuers by turning round and walking back the way she had come.

Control had just worked out the necessary orders to jerk the machine into reverse when it was seen that Mrs. Coulman had retraced her steps to admire a flowering shrub in a front garden she had passed. Looking carefully about her to see that no one was watching, she nipped off a small spray and put it in her buttonhole. Then she turned back toward Highside Hill and made, without further check, for the Tube Station.

Details nine and ten were Detective Sergeants Petrella and Wynne. They were waiting inside the station, at the head of the emergency stairs, and were already equipped with all-day tickets. When Mrs. Coulman reached the station entrance, therefore, she found it deserted. She bought a ticket for Euston and took the elevator. A young man in corduroys and a raincoat, and an older one in flannel trousers, a windbreaker, and a club scarf were already on the platform, waiting for the train. They got into the cars on either side of her.

Above their heads the machine jerked abruptly into top gear. A word was exchanged with the booking-office clerk and two taxis sped toward Euston.

Mrs. Coulman, however, had disconcertingly changed her mind. Euston, Goodge Street, Tottenham Court Road—station after station came and went and still she sat on. Her seat had been chosen to command the exits of her own and the two neighboring cars. She seemed to take a close interest in the people who got on and off. But if she noticed that the men who had come from Highside were still with her, she gave no sign.

It was nearly half an hour later when she quitted the train at Clapham Common Station and made for the moving staircase, looking neither to right nor to left.

Petrella had time for a quick word with Wynne. "It's my belief the old bitch has rumbled us," he said. "Get on the blower

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and bring the rest of the gang down here, as quickly as possible. Meanwhile, I'll do my best to keep on her tail."

This proved easy. Mrs. Coulman walked down the street without so much as a backward glance and disappeared into the saloon bar of The Admiral Keppel public house. Petrella made a detour of the place to insure that it had no back entrance and settled down to watch. It could hardly have been better situated for his purpose. The doors of its saloon and public bar opened side by side onto the same strip of pavement. Opposite them stood a sandwich bar, with a telephone.

"I don't think we ought to crowd the old girl," said Petrella into the telephone. "It's my impression she's got eyes in the back of her head. If you could send someone—not Wynne, she's seen too much of him already this morning—and put a man at either end of the street, so that *we* don't have to follow her immediately she goes—"

The voice at the other end approved these arrangements. Time passed. Petrella saw Detective Constable Mote ambling down the pavement and flagged him in.

"She's been there a long time," he said. "It must be nearly closing time."

"Sure she hasn't come out?" said Mote.

Petrella looked at his little book. "Two businessmen," he said. "One youth with a girl friend, aged about seventeen and skinny. One sailor with a kitbag. That's the score to date."

The door of the public bar opened and three men came out and stood talking to the landlord, who seemed to know them. The men went off down the road together, the landlord disappeared inside, and they heard the sound of bolts being shut.

"Hey," said Petrella. "What's all this?"

"It's all right. There's still someone in the saloon bar," said Mote. "I can see the shadow on the glass. Seems to be knocking her drink back."

"Slip across and have a look," said Petrella.

Mote crossed the road lower down and strolled up past the ground-glass window of the saloon bar.

"It's a woman," he reported. "Sitting in the corner, drinking. I think the landlord's trying to turn her out."

As he spoke the door was flung open and the last of the customers appeared. She was the same shape as Mrs. Coulman, but she seemed to have

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changed her hat and coat, and to have done something to her face, which was now a mottled red.

She stood on the pavement for a moment, while the landlord bolted the door behind her. Then she plowed off, straight and strong up the street, dipping very slightly as she went.

A thin woman coming out of a shop with a basketful of groceries was nearly run down. She saved herself by a quick sidestep, and said, in reproof, "Carnchew look where you're goin'?"

The massive woman halted, wheeled, and hit the thin woman in the eye. It was a beautiful, coordinated, unconscious movement, as full of grace and power as a backhand passing shot by a tennis champion at the top of her form.

The thin woman went down, but was up again in a flash. She was no quitter. She kicked her opponent hard on the ankle. A uniformed policeman appeared, closely followed by Sergeant Gwilliam, who had been waiting round the corner and felt that it was time to intervene. The massive woman, thus beset, backheeled at her first assailant, aimed a swinging blow with a carrier bag full of bottles at the Constable, missed him, and hit Sergeant Gwilliam.

Some hours later Superintendent Palance said coldly, to Superintendent Haxtell, "I take it that Sergeant Petrella is a reliable officer."

"I have always found him so," said Haxtell, equally coldly.

"This woman, to whom he seems, at some point, to have transferred his attention, is certainly not Mrs. Coulman."

"Apparently not," said Haxtell. "In fact, she is a well-known local character called Big Bertha. She is also believed to hold the woman's drinking records for both draught and bottled beer south of the Thames."

"Indeed?" Superintendent Palance considered the information carefully. "There is no possibility, I suppose, that she and Mrs. Coulman are leading a double life?"

"You mean," said Haxtell, "that the same woman is sometimes the respectable Mrs. Coulman of Bond Road, Highside, and sometimes the alcoholic Bertha of Clapham? It's an attractive idea, but I'm afraid it won't wash. Bertha's prison record alone makes it an impossibility. During the month you've been watching Mrs. Coulman, Bertha has, I'm afraid, appeared no less than four times in the Southwark Magistrates Court."

"In that case," said Palance

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reasonably, "since the lady under observation was Mrs. Coulman when she started, Sergeant Petrella must have slipped up at some point."

"I agree," said Haxtell. "But where?"

"That is for him to explain."

"It's a stark impossibility," said Petrella, later that day. "I *know* it was Mrs. Coulman when she went into the pub. There's no back entrance. I mean that, literally. The landlord himself has to come out of one of the bar doors when he leaves. And our local people say he's perfectly reliable. They've got nothing against him at all."

"Could she have done a quick-change act? Is there a ladies' lavatory, or someplace like that?"

"Yes. There's a lavatory. And she could have gone into it, and changed into other clothes which she had ready in her suitcase. It's all right as a theory. It's when you try to turn it into fact that it gets difficult. I saw nine people coming out of that pub. The first two were business types from the saloon bar. The landlord didn't know them, but they seemed to know each other. And anyway, they just dropped in for a whiskey and out again. Then there was a boy and girl in the public bar. They held hands most of the time and didn't weigh much more than a hundred and twenty apiece."

"None of them sounds very likely," agreed Haxtell. "And the three workmen were local characters, or so I gather. That leaves the woman and the sailor."

"Right," said Petrella. "And since we know that the woman wasn't Mrs. Coulman, it leaves the sailor. He was broadly the right size and shape and weight, and he was the only one carrying anything. Thinking it over, one can see that's significant. He had a kitbag over his shoulder."

"Just how is a suitcase turned into a kitbag?"

"That part wouldn't be too difficult. The suitcase could easily be a sham. A fabric cover round a collapsible frame, which would fold up to almost nothing and go inside the kitbag with the wig and hat and coat and the rest of the stuff," Petrella explained.

"Where did the kitbag come from? Oh, I see. She would have had it inside the suitcase. One wave of the wand and a large woman with a large suitcase turns into a medium-sized sailor with a kitbag."

"Right," said Petrella. "And there's only one drawback. The sailor was a man, not a woman at all."

"You're sure?"

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"Absolutely and completely sure," said Petrella. "He crossed the road and passed within a few feet of me. He was wearing bell-bottom trousers and a dark blue sweater. There are certain anatomical differences, you know. And Mrs. Coulman was a very womanly woman."

"A queenly figure," agreed Haxtell. "Yes, I see what you mean."

"It's not only that," said Petrella. "A woman might get away with being dressed as a man on the stage. Or seen from a distance, or from behind. But not in broad daylight, face to face in the street. A man's hair grows in quite a different way, and his ears are bigger, and—"

"All right," said Haxtell. "I'll take your word for it." He paused and added, "Palance thinks you fell asleep on the job, and Mrs. Coulman slipped out when you weren't looking."

"I know," said Petrella. An awkward silence ensued.

Petrella said, "Will they keep up the watch?"

"I should think they'd lay off her a bit," said Haxtell. "It's an expensive job, immobilizing a couple of dozen men. And a dinosaur would be suspicious after yesterday's performance. I should think they'd let her run for a bit. There's no reason you shouldn't keep your eyes open, though—unofficially."

Petrella devoted what time he could spare in the next six weeks to his self-appointed task. His landlady's married sister had a house in Bond Road, so he spent a lot of time in her front parlor and, after dark, prowling round Number 35, the end house on the other side of the road. He also made friends with the booking clerks at Highside Station and Pond End Station; and spent an interesting afternoon in the German Section of the Foreign Office.

"One thing's clear enough," he said to Haxtell. "When she's on the job, she starts on the Underground. Taxis and buses are too easy to follow. If you go by Underground, the pursuit has got to come down with you. Or guard the exit of every Underground Station in London simultaneously, which is a stark impossibility.

"Anyway, I know that's what she does. She's been seen half a dozen times leaving Highside Station, carrying that trick suitcase. She books to any old station. She's only got to pay the difference at the other end. She's a bit more cautious, too, after that last fiasco. She won't get onto the train if there's any other passenger she can't account for on the platform. Sometimes she's let three or four trains go past."

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Haxtell reflected on all this, and said, "It seems a pretty watertight system to me. How do you suggest we break in it?"

"Well, I think we've got to take a chance," said Petrella. "In theory it would be safer with a lot of people, but actually, I don't think it would work at all. That kind can always spot organized opposition. There's just a chance, if you'd let two or three of us try it, next time we get word that she's likely to be busy—"

"We'll see," said Haxtell.

Three nights after these words were spoken, on a Saturday, the redoubtable twin brothers, Jack and Sidney Ponting, made entry into Messrs. Alfrey's West End establishment by forcing the skylight of an adjacent building, picking three separate locks, cutting their way through an eighteen-inch brick wall, and blowing the lock neatly out of the door of the new Alfrey strongroom. When the staff arrived on Monday they found a mess of brickwork and twisted steel. The losses included 14 large rough diamonds deposited by a Greek shipowner. They were to have formed the nuptial headdress of his bride.

"It's a Ponting job," said Superintendent Palance. "It's got their registered trademark all over it. Get after them quick. They're probably in hiding."

But the Pontings were not hiding. They were at home and in bed. They raised no objection to a search of their premises.

"It's irregular," said Sidney. "But what have we got to hide?"

"You boys have got your job to do," said Jack. "Get it finished and we can get on with our breakfast."

Palance came up to see Haxtell.

"They certainly did it. They most certainly did it. Equally certainly they've dumped the diamonds. And none of them has reached a receiver yet, I'm sure of that. And the Pontings use Mrs. Coulman."

"Yes," said Haxtell. "Well, we must hope to do better this time."

"Are you set on trying it on your own?"

Palance held the same rank as Haxtell. But he was longer in service and older in experience. Haxtell thought of these things and paused. He was well aware of the responsibility he was shouldering and which he could so easily evade. Then he said, "I really think the only way is to try it ourselves, quietly."

"All right," said Palance. He didn't add, "And on your own

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head be it." He was never a man to waste words.

Four days followed, during which Petrella attended to his other duties as well as he could by day and prowled round the curtilage of Number 35 Bond Road by night. Four days in which Sergeant Gwilliam, Wilmot, and Mote were never out of reach of a telephone, and Superintendent Haxtell sweated.

On the fifth night Petrella gave the signal: Tomorrow's the day. And at eleven o'clock next morning, sure enough, the front door opened and Mrs. Coulman peered forth. She was wearing her traveling coat and hat, and grasped in her muscular right hand was the fabric-covered suitcase.

She walked ponderously down the road. However acute her suspicions may have been, there was nothing for them to feed on. For it is a fact that at that moment no one was watching her at all.

Ten minutes later she was purchasing a ticket at Highside Station. The entrance to the station was deserted. She waited placidly for the lift.

The elevator and Sergeant Gwilliam arrived simultaneously. He was dressed as a workman, and he seemed to be in a hurry. He bought a ticket to the Elephant and Castle and got into the elevator beside Mrs. Coulman. In silence, and avoiding each other's eye, they descended to platform level. In silence they waited for the train.

When the train arrived, Sergeant Gwilliam hesitated. He seemed to have an eye on Mrs. Coulman's movements. They approached the train simultaneously. At the very last moment Mrs. Coulman stopped. Sergeant Gwilliam went on, the doors closed, and the train disappeared bearing the Sergeant with it.

Mrs. Coulman returned to her seat on the platform and waited placidly. By the time the next train arrived, the only other occupants of the platform were three school girls. Mrs. Coulman got into the train, followed by the schoolgirls. Two stations later the schoolgirls got off. Mrs. Coulman, from her customary seat beside the door, watched them go.

Thereafter, as the train ran south, she observed a succession of people getting on and off. There were three people she did not see. Petrella, with Mote and Wilmot, had entered the train at the station before her. Sergeant Gwilliam's planned diversion had given them plenty of time to get there. Petrella was in the first and the other two were in the last two

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cars of the train.

It was at Balham that Mrs. Coulman finally emerged. Two women with shopping bags, who had joined her car at Leicester Square, went with her. Also a commercial traveler with samples, whom she had watched join the next car at the Oval.

Petrella, Mote, and Wilmot all saw her go, but it was no part of their plan to follow her, so they sat tight.

At the next stop all three of them raced for the moving stairs, hurled themselves into the street, and found a taxi.

"I'm off duty," said the taxi driver.

"Now you're on again," said Petrella, and showed him his warrant card. "Get us back to Balham Station as quick as you can."

The taxi driver blinked, but complied. Petrella had his eye on his watch.

"She's had four minutes' start," he said, as they bundled out. "You know what to do. Take every pub in your sector. And get a move on."

The three men separated. There is no lack of public houses in that part of South London, but Petrella calculated that if they worked outward from the station, taking a sector each, they could cover most of them quickly. It was the riskiest part of the scheme, but he could think of no way to avoid it.

He himself found her.

She was sitting quietly in the corner of the saloon bar of The Gatehouse, a big newish establishment at the junction of the High Street and Trinity Road.

There was no convenient snack bar this time; there was very little cover at all. The best he could find was a bus shelter. If he stood behind it, it did at least screen him from the door.

The minutes passed and added up to a quarter of an hour. Then to half an hour. During that time two people had gone in and three had come out, but none of them had aroused Petrella's interest. He knew, more or less, what he was looking for.

At last the door opened and a man emerged. He was a thick, well set-up man, dressed in a close-fitting flannel suit which was tight enough across the shoulders and round the chest to exhibit his athletic frame. And he was carrying a small canvas bag, of a type that athletes use to hold their sports gear.

He turned left, and swung off down the pavement with an unmistakable, aggressive masculine stride, a mature bull of the human herd, confident of his strength and purpose.

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Petrella let him have the length of the street, then trotted after him. This was where he had to be very careful. What he mostly needed was help. The chase swung back past the Underground and there he spotted Wilmot and signaled him across.

"In the gray flannel suit, carrying a bag," he said. "See him? Then get right after him, and remember, he's got eyes in the back of his head."

Wilmot grinned all over his guttersnipe face. He was imaginatively dressed in a teddy-boy suit and he fitted into the South London streets as easily as a rabbit into a warren.

"Doanchew worry," he said, "I won't lose him."

Petrella fell back until he was 100 yards behind Wilmot. He kept his eyes open for Mote. The more of them the merrier. There was a long hard chase ahead.

He noticed Wilmot signaling.

"Gone in there," said Wilmot.

"Where?"

"Small shop. Bit of the way up the side street."

Petrella considered. "Walk past," he said. "Take a note of the name and number on the shop. Go straight on, out of sight, to the other end. If he goes that way, you can pick him up. If he comes back I'll take him."

Ten minutes went by. Petrella thought anxiously about back exits. But you couldn't guard against everything.

Then the man reappeared. He was carrying the same bag, yet it looked different. Less bulky but, by the swing of it, heavier.

He's dumped the hat and coat and the remains of the suitcase at that accommodation address, thought Petrella. Even if we lose him, we know one of the Ponting hideouts. But we mustn't lose him. That bag's got several thousand pounds' worth of stolen jewelry in it now.

Would it be best to arrest him and give up any chance of tracing the receiver? The temptation was almost overmastering. Only one thing stopped him. His quarry was moving with much greater freedom, as if convinced that there was no danger. Near the end of the run he would get cautious again. For the moment that was nothing to do but follow.

The man plunged back in the Underground, emerged at Waterloo, joined the queue at the Suburban Booking Office. Petrella kept well clear for he owned a ticket which enabled him to travel anywhere on the railway.

Waterloo was a station whose layout he knew well. By posi-

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tioning himself at the central bookstall, he could watch all three exits. His quarry had bought, and was eating, a meat pie. Petrella was quite unconscious of hunger. His eyes were riveted on the little bag, swinging heavily from the man's large fist. Once he put it down, but it was only to get out more money to buy an orange, which he peeled and ate neatly, depositing the remains in one of the refuse bins. Then he picked up the bag again and made for his train.

It was the electric line for Staines and Windsor. He went through the barrier and walked slowly up the train. There were very few passengers about, and the train must have been near empty. He walked along the platform and climbed into a car at the far end.

Some instinct restrained Petrella. There were still five minutes before the train left. He waited. Three minutes later the man emerged from the car, walked slowly back down the train, glancing into each car as he passed, and got into the car nearest to the barrier. The guard blew his whistle.

Two girls who had been sauntering toward the barrier broke into a run—and Petrella ran with them. They pushed through the gate. The guard blew his whistle again; they jerked open the door of the nearest car and tumbled in together.

"We nearly left that too late," said one of the girls. Her friend agreed with her. Petrella thought that they couldn't have timed it better. But he didn't say so. He was prepared to agree with everything they said. It was the quickest way he knew of getting on with people.

The girls were prepared to enjoy his company too. The dark vivacious one was called Beryl and the quieter mousy one was Doreen. They lived at Staines.

"Where are you getting out?" asked Beryl. "Or is that a secret?"

"I haven't made my mind up yet," said Petrella.

Beryl said he was a case. Doreen agreed.

The train ambled through dim-forgotten places like Feltham and Ashford. No one got out and no one got in. Petrella heard about a dance, and what had gone on afterward in the parking lot. He said he was sorry he didn't live at Staines. It sounded quite a place.

"It's all right in summer," said Doreen. "It's a dump in winter. Here we are."

The train drew up.

"Sure you won't change your mind?" said Beryl.

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"Perhaps I will, at that," said Petrella. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that his man had got out and was making his way along the platform.

"You'd better hurry up then. They'll take you on to Windsor."

"That would never do," said Petrella. "I forgot to warn her that I was coming."

"Who?" said Doreen.

"The Queen."

His man was safely past the ticket collector now.

"Come on," said Beryl. They went past the collector together. "Wouldn't you like some tea? There's a good place in the High Street."

"There's nothing I'd like better, but I think I see my uncle waving to me."

The girls stared at him. Petrella maneuvered himself across the open yard, keeping the girls between him and his quarry. The man had set off up the road without, apparently, so much as a backward glance, but Petrella knew that the most difficult part of the chase was at hand.

"I don't see your uncle," said Beryl.

"There he is. Sitting in that taxi."

"That's just the taxi driver. I don't believe he's your uncle at all."

"Certainly he is. How are you keeping, uncle?"

"Very fit, thank you," said the taxi driver, a middle-aged man with a brown bald head.

"There you are," said Petrella. "I'll have to say goodbye now. We've got a lot to talk about. Family business."

The girls hesitated, and then withdrew, baffled.

"You a policeman?" said the taxi driver. "A detective or something?"

"As a matter of fact, I am."

"Following that man in the light suit? I thought as much. Very pretty, the way you got behind those girls. As good as a book."

His quarry was now halfway up the long, straight empty road, which leads from Staines Station to the riverside. He had stopped to light a cigarette, and in stopping he half turned.

"Keep behind my cab," said the driver. "That's right, well down. He's getting nervous. I'd say he's not far from wherever it is he's going to. Good as a book, isn't it? Do you read detective stories?"

The man was walking on again now. He was a full 300 yards away.

"I don't want to lose him," said Petrella. "Not now. I've come a long way with him."

"You leave it to me," said the cab driver. "I've been driving round here for forty years.

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There isn't a footpath I don't know blindfold. Just watch which way he turns at the end."

"Turning right," said Petrella.

"All aboard." The taxi shot out of the station yard, and the driver turned round in his seat to say, "Might be making for the High Street, but if he wanted the High Street, why not take a bus from the other platform? Ten to one he's for the ferry."

"I say, look out for that dog," said Petrella.

The driver slewed back in his seat and said, "Effie Muggridge's poodle. Asking for trouble," and accelerated. The dog shot to safety with a squeal of rage.

"Got to do this bit carefully," said the driver as they reached the corner. "Keep right down. Don't show so much as the tip of your nose, now."

Petrella obeyed. The taxi rounded the corner, and over it, in a wave, flowed the unmistakable smell of the river on a hot day—weed and water and tar and boat varnish.

"He's in the ferry," said the driver. "Got his back to you. You can come up for air now."

Petrella saw that a ferry punt ran from the steps beside a public house. There were three passengers on her, standing cheek by jowl, and the ferryman was untying and pushing out. He realized how hopeless he would have been on his own.

"What do we do?" he said.

"Over the road bridge and back down the other side. Plenty of time, if we hurry."

"What were we doing just now?"

The driver chuckled throatily. Petrella held his breath and counted to ten, slowly. Then they were crossing Staines Bridge.

"Not much traffic just now," said the driver. "You ought to see it on weekends." They did a skid turn to the left and drew up in the yard of another riverside inn.

"There's two things he could do," said the driver. "Walk up the towpath to the bridge. There's no way off it. Or he could come down the path—you see the stile?—the one that comes out there. I'll watch the stile. You go through that gate and down the garden—I know the man who owns it. He won't mind. You can see the towpath from his summerhouse. If you hear my horn, come back quick."

With a feeling that some power much stronger than himself had taken charge, Petrella opened a gate and walked down a well-kept garden, full of pinks

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and roses and stone dwarfs with pointed hats. At the bottom was a summer house. In the summer house he found a small girl reading a book.

"Are you coming to tea?" she said.

"I'm not sure," said Petrella. "I might be going to the cinema."

"You'll have to hurry then. The big film starts in five minutes."

Behind him a hooter sounded off.

"I'll run then," said Petrella. He scooted back up the garden. The girl never raised her eyes from her book.

"Just come out," said the taxi driver. "Going nicely. We'll give him twenty yards. Can't afford too much leeway here. Tricky navigation."

He drove slowly toward the turning and stopped just short of it.

"Better hop out and look," he said. "But be careful. He's stopped twice already to blow his nose. We're getting pretty warm."

Petrella inched up to the corner and poked his head round the wall. The man was going away from him, walking along the pavement, but slowly. It was an area of bungalows, some on the road, some on the river bank, with a network of private walks between.

The taxi driver had got out and was breathing down the back of his neck.

"Got to take a chance," he said. "If we follow him, he'll spot us for sure. I'll stay here. If he turns right, I'll mark it. If he turns left he's for Riverside Drive. You nip down that path and you can cut him off."

Petrella took the path. It ran between high hedges of dusty bramble and thorn, hot and sweet-smelling in the sun. It was the dead middle of the afternoon, with hardly a dog stirring. Petrella broke into a jog trot, then slowed for the road ahead.

As he reached the corner, he heard footsteps on the pavement. Their beat was unmistakable. It was his man and he was walking straight toward him.

Petrella looked round for cover and saw none. He thought for a moment of diving into the shallow ditch, but realized that he would merely be attracting attention. The footsteps had stopped. Petrella held his breath. He heard the click of a latch. Feet on flagstones. The sudden purring of an electric bell.

The chase was over.

"I'm not saying," said Palance, "that it wasn't a success. It was a success. Yes."

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Haxtell said nothing. He knew just how Palance was feeling and sympathized with him.

"We've got back the Alfrey diamonds and we've got our hands on that man at Staines. An insurance broker, of all things, and quite unsuspected. Judging from what we found in the false bottom of a punt in his boathouse he's been receiving stolen goods for years. And we've stopped up one of the Ponting middlemen at that tobacconist's in Balham. A little more pressure and we may stop the Pontings too."

"Quite," said Haxtell sympathetically.

"All the same, it was a mad way to do it. You can't get over that, Haxtell. How long have you known that Coulman was a man?"

"We realized that as soon as we started to think about it," said Haxtell. "It was obviously impossible for a real, middle-aged buxom woman to turn into a convincing man. But, conversely, it was easy enough for a man dressed as a woman, padded and powdered and wigged, to whip it all off and turn back quickly into his own self."

"Then do you mean to say," said Palance, "that the Mrs. Coulman my men were watching for a month—doing her shopping, gossiping, hanging out her washing, having tea with the vicar—was really a man all the time?"

"Certainly not," said Haxtell. Observing symptoms of apoplexy, he said, "That *was* Mrs. Coulman. She had a brother—two actually. One was killed by the Nazis. The other one got over to England. Whenever she had a big job on hand, her brother would come along at night. The house she lived in was at the end of the row. There was a way in at the side. He could slip in late at night without anyone seeing him. Next day he'd dress up in his sister's coat and hat and go out and do the job. She stayed quietly home."

"When you realized this," said Palance, "wouldn't it have been better to do the job properly? You could have had a hundred men if necessary."

"*It wouldn't have worked.* Not a chance. You can't beat a methodical man like Coulman by being more methodical. He'll outdo you every time. The Underground, the change of clothes, the careful train check before he started for Staines, the long straight road, and the ferry. What you want with a man like that is luck—"

"Yes, but—" said Palance.

"Method, ingenuity, system," said Superintendent Haxtell, "and a little imagination."

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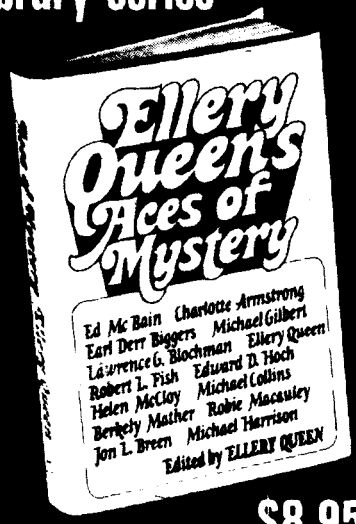
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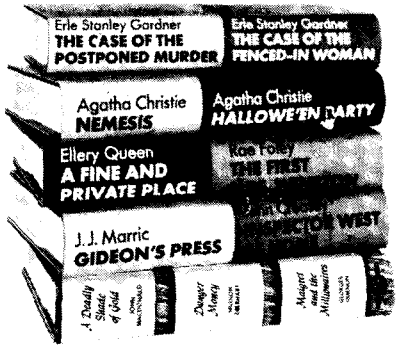

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